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BRINDLE ROYALIST

*A Story
of the Australian Plains*

HENRY G. LAMOND

William Morrow & Company

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Author's Note

This story is not dated. It would fit any time during the past forty years. The only difference between then and now would be an occasional fence, an odd bore or two, other similar items. The country, stock, and working remain the same.

Yalbungra is a fictitious station that can be placed at any spot to suit the reader's convenience between the towns of Boulia and Urandangie on the Georgina River. All names are fictitious except those of geographical features that belong to the country. The characters are purely fictitious, and the person who tries to associate himself with any of them is guilty of egregious conceit.

To those who would doubt: I have seen, taken part in, or been connected with every incident related in this book. I do not attempt to describe anything that may strain the credulity of others. I state the facts plainly, in simple language, without unnecessary dramatization, and exactly as I knew them to take place.

I realize from experience that few people ever read the Preface to a book. If any have stayed with me this far, I beg their further forbearance and ask that they glance through the Glossary before starting the story.

Contents

CHAPTER	PAGE
1. Wuringle Arcadian Royalist XVI	3
2. The Brindle Calf	10
3. The Telepathists	22
4. The Battle of Life	34
5. The First Adventure	47
6. The Second Round	63
7. The Third Round	73
8. The Brumby Mob	90
9. Routine	100
10. The Aborigines	112
11. The Outcast	125
12. The Challenge	141
13. Bred in the Bone	155
14. The Pituri Harvest	174
15. The Conqueror	185
16. The Reprieve	199
17. The Last Round	209
18. Brindle Royalist	225

Illustrations

BY LAJOS SEGNER

	PAGE
She turned to the new-born calf lying before her	13
The thunder of the whip sounded and the lightning of its lash hit	59
The birds rose as one and banked steeply	79
He raked dust in a challenge to the unknown fear	135
He waited till Brindle was within a hundred yards	161
The dog flung high, cracked like a whip as the bull shook his head	217

BLACKS: Native aboriginals.

BLOODY: The Great Australian Adjective. See above, Bastard.

BLOODWOOD: A large tree with red gum (*Eucalyptus pyrophora*).

BOY: A male aboriginal of any age.

BRONCO: A system of branding.

BROLGA: Australian crane (*Megalornis rubicundus*).

BRUMBY: Wild and untamed stock, usually horses; applied also to cattle.

BUSHED: Lost.

BUDGERIGAR: Warbling grass parrot (*Melopsittacus undulatus*).

CAMP: This has sundry meanings. For instance, a man might say: "I was having a camp [sleep] in my camp [resting place] when up rode a camp [team or body] of men. They took the cattle off camp [resting place] and put them on camp [an area where they are worked]." In each case the reader can deduce the meaning by the context.

CANEGRASS: A channel grass (*Eragrostis australasica*).

CARROT: A winter herbage (*Daucus glochidiatus*).

CLEANSKIN: Unbranded stock.

COOLAMON: A bark or wooden basin or trough.

COOLIBAH: A river gum-tree (*Eucalyptus Coolabah*).

COONGABERRY: Black-currant bush (*Carissa ovata*).

CORROBOREE: A native dance.

CORELLA: Long-billed cockatoo (*Kakatoë tenuirostris*).

CROW: Common crow (*Corvus cecilæ*).

CUT: To emasculate or castrate; cattle taken from a camp; portion of a mob.

DAMPER: A loaf cooked in the ashes; johnny-(journey)cake.

DILLY-BAG: A gin's woven net bag; a carry-all.

- DOVE: Probably a little dove (*Geopelia cuneata*).
- EAGLE-HAWK: Wedge-tailed eagle (*Uroaëtus audax*).
- EMU: Australia's national bird (*Dromaius novæ-hollandiæ*).
- FLOCK PIGEON: A migratory pigeon (*Histriophaps histrionica*).
- GALAH: Rose-breasted cockatoo (*Kakatoë roseicapilla*).
- GHILGAI: A pockmarked depression in the ground, usually on top of the watershed, about 30 feet in diameter by about 2 feet deep.
- GIBBER: A small, hard rock.
- GIDYEA: The common western tree (*Acacia Cambagei*).
- GIN: Female aboriginal.
- GOANNA: Laced monitor lizard (*Varanus varius*).
- GUNYAH: Native building or lean-to.
- HIM: A pronoun that may be first, second, or third person; singular or plural; masculine, feminine, common, or neuter gender; and nominative, vocative, or accusative in case. The reader can gather the meaning from the context.
- INSIDE: Pastoral country adjacent to a railway or port.
- JAKE: O.K.—right—correct.
- KOPAI: A semitransparent stone, probably gypsum.
- LIGNUM: A channel bush, shrub, or vine (*Muhlenbeckia Cunninghamii*).
- MICKEY: An unbranded bull calf up to about 18 months old.
- MITCHELL GRASS: The common grass of the West (*Astrebala pectinata*).
- MOB: A drove, or herd, as of cattle, sheep, or horses.
- MULCURRY: A revolting sexual act and genital mutilation practiced as initiation, punishment, or rite.
- MUNGEROO: A delicate plant on claypans (*Cyperus bulbosus*).
- MYALL: A wild, uncivilized aboriginal.
- PAD: The track made by stock traveling one line regularly.

PARRAKYLIA: A pulpy vine (*Calandrinia balonensis*).

PIKER: An aged and cunning bullock, usually with long horns.

PLAIN TURKEY: The Australian bustard (*Eupodotis australis*).

PODDY: An orphaned animal, stunted in its growth.

QUAIL: Button bird (*Turnix velox*).

RAN: Stock "run" on an area when they feed on that country.

RUN: A station—usually applied to the outer part of the property.

RUSH: Small cattlemen and town writers refer to this phenomenon as a "stampede." But that term is never heard in the big bush—the word used is "rush."

RIVERS: Western Queensland rivers run only during the wet season. For the rest of the year they are, as they have been aptly called, a "broken chain of dry waterholes."

STAG: A fully sexed bull prior to emasculation.

SEASON: The wet season, normally from January to March.

SCRUBBER: Wild cattle. See "Brumby."

SPINIFEX: A sandy or desert growth (*Triodia sp.*).

STATION: An area devoted to pastoral pursuits; what is called a "ranch" in the U. S. A.

TERRITORY: The Northern Territory.

TAIL: To keep in hand (to "shepherd" with sheep, to "tail" with cattle).

TOP-KNOT: Top-knot pigeon (*Ocyphaps lophates*).

TOWRI: The land, state, district, area, or country owned by a tribe.

WAXBILL: Zebra finch (*Tæniopygia castanotis*).

WHISTLING DUCK: A common western duck (*Dendrocygna arcuata*).

WHITEWOOD: A sparse tree (*Atalaya hemiglauca*).

WHISTLE: See "Mulcurry."

WILGA: Sometimes called "Willow" (*Geijera parviflora*).

WORKS: Meatworks, abattoirs.

WATERHEN: Black-tailed waterhen (*Tribonyx ventralis*).

YARRAMAN: Supposed to be the aboriginal name for "horse," but—since the aboriginals did not know what a horse was—this derivation seems doubtful.

YELLOWBELLY: A large freshwater fish of the perch family.

FLINDERS GRASS: In the West, a grass preferring wet places (*Iseilema membranacea*).

BRINDLE ROYALIST

I. *Wuringle Arcadian Royalist XVI*

BILLY MARSHALL, BULL DROVER, TOOK A DAMPER from the ashes, dusted it, stood it on its edge leaning against a pack-bag to cool, and looked about his camp.

His spare horses, hobbled, were feeding quietly; his pack-saddles and other gear were scattered in disordered neatness about the fire; out on the downs, in the distance, a moving smudge told of bush cattle working the country; a saddled horse stood tied to a solitary whitewood tree near the spot he had chosen for his night-camp. The one glance he gave his camp sufficed to tell him it was in order. He went to that saddled horse, slipped the reins over its head, mounted it, and rode south down the course of the Georgina River.

Like all bushmen, Billy talked to himself when alone:

"It's fairly early in March. Th' season's been good, an' all creeks an' waterholes is full. That means there won't be no bush cattle comin' in to th' river durin' th' night. Tomorrow night I'll make th' junction; next night th' boundary; in six weeks I should be gettin' near Cootcah Downs, where I'm to deliver his nibs.

"Wuringle Arcadian Royalist Sixteent"—that's his

nibs. They reckon he's th' best bull what ever come out to th' back country. So he should be, with all th' care they're takin' of him. Fancy sendin' a blackboy to meet me at th' railhead! To meet me! As if I, Billy Marshall, bull drover be profession, couldn't bring out one bull, fourteen stud cows, an' three calves on me own!

"Still, Jumma, th' boy, is handy: he gives me somethin' to cuss at when things don't go right. He's got th' mob over there now, by th' looks of them hawks. You can always tell where there's a mob of driven stock at this time of th' year—there'll be a mob of kites flyin' overhead to pounce on any quail and larks what th' stock brushes up out of th' grass. That boy's a good stockman: he's takin' th' mob nice an' steady.

"This is Yalbungra Station what we're on now. Their cattle's well worked an' nice an' quiet. I won't have no trouble with them. I was hearin' there was a mob of brumby cattle over towards th' desert west of th' river. They won't be comin' over this side for to molest me.

"That boy takes them cattle nice an' quiet," he went on, compelled to admiration as he neared his little mob. Purely from force of habit he shouted an admonition: "Take them cattle quiet, Jumma! They ain't no scrubbers what you're runnin'. Let 'em feed along an' take their time."

Billy rode about his little mob; he counted them, as he did a hundred times during the day; ignoring the presence of the boy, he gave voice to his thoughts again:

"So you're Wuringle Arcadian Royalist Sixteent', champeen of champeens, lord of th' Shorthorn Herd-Book an' future king of Cootcah. From th' time you was a babby in arms you been takin' blue an' purple ribbons; when you left your mother's teats you headed for a kingship of your own; now you're comin' to th' back country for to improve th' breed of cattle on Cootcah and have your own little stud there for to breed herd bulls for th' station. You can do it. You're th' loveliest thing of your breed ever I seen wrapped in live hide. You got quality, size, balance, constitution, masculinity, an' all what goes to make a champeen bull. You've got it. You're a lovely rich roan, an' that mark on your forehead is what you an' your family gets its name from. I never seen a more perfect crown, even to that little knobby thing on top what they calls a diadem. It's clean cut, with not one hair out of place, an' almost you'd think someone stamped it there from a photo. They tells me all them Royalist bulls has got that crown on the forehead—that's what give 'em th' name. You've got it—you've got it full measure, pressed down an' brimmin' over.

"But you does look a fool with that cowbell tied roun' your neck. As Mr. Leonard, of Yalbungra, says when he sees it: 'Th' thing's incongruous, like puttin' a baby's rattle roun' th' neck of a grizzly bear.' He's right—an' I'll guess at th' meanin' of that '*congruous*' thing. But that bell's handy, Royalist, ol' man. Every time you moves durin' th' night I can tell what you're

doin'. You can't do no sneaky-hide with that bell lettin' me know where you are an' what you're doin'.

"Whoa, th' cattle! Whoa, there. Right, Jumma: you take 'im yarraman belong-it water. You hobble 'im then. I'll keep this fellow, this horse what I'm ridin', tied up all night. We'll camp th' cattle here."

The little mob of cattle had been on the road a month or more and they were accustomed to the routine and broken in to road etiquette. They grazed about the plains within range of the camp fire. As the sun was sinking Billy drove them quietly to the spot he had selected, and—almost as if they had been put to bed by the man—they lay down with many deep sighs and stertorous grunts. Royalist, a mammoth among his cows, took his accustomed position on the outer ring farthest from the camp fire, and his bell tinkled rhythmically, if a trifle monotonously, as it swung to the action of his jaws as he chewed the cud.

Billy and Jumma had their supper and a smoke, unrolled their swags, and lay down. Billy felt no worry lest his charges wander during the night. They were full to repletion, contented, quiet. At that time of the year, bush cattle were unlikely to wander in near the river frontage before daylight. He knew that, between ten and midnight when a late moon rose, the cattle might get to their feet and walk about a little. But this prospect did not worry him: the bell would wake him the instant it took a new note, and he was so familiar with it that he could read its meaning more plainly than print in capital letters.

The night passed without incident. Just as the first dull fingers of lead were probing over the eastern sky, a shadow drifted towards the camping cattle. It might be anything; it might be nothing. Its shape was nebulous, its movements silent, its approach wary.

Royalist lifted his head as the scent of that strange something came to him. His bell jangled as he rose to his feet and advanced towards the undefined body that was coming towards him.

Billy lifted his head, wakened from deep sleep the moment that new note of the bell had sounded. He listened for a minute or more.

"It's on'y Royalist goin' to one of his cows," he muttered. "There's a half-hour till daylight yet. He's right."

The something that approached the mob was a cow. She was yellow-and-black-striped—that indistinguishable yellow with brindle markings which denotes the run-out segments of several diverse breeds, the product of indiscriminate breeding—in short, a mongrel. She had a symbol brand splashed on her off ribs, showing that she was not bred in Queensland. Doubtless she had been bred in the rough country in West Australia and been brought over with a traveling mob, and, in that rush a year ago on Yalbungra, she had got away and remained lost.

She had all the nervousness and stealth of a scrubber, the sliding motion of a snake, and the startled actions of a deer. She was long of horn and back, slab-sided, hard and tight of skin; one eye showed a gaping

socket. Though she was all that Royalist was not, she advanced to meet him with all the confidence of an arrogant streetwalker.

Royalist was a nobleman of his breed, bred in the purple, stall-fed and allowed to mix with and meet only those of the other sex who were of the same lineage as himself. He was a lord of the Stud-Book; but he was also a bull. Perhaps—it was just possible—this clandestine meeting in the quarter-light of dawn tickled his spirit of adventure and added piquancy to the incident.

A sudden jangling of the bell brought Billy from his swag, full-clad but for his boots.

"It's on'y Royalist playin' th' fool with some of his cows," Billy muttered. "Anyway, it's gettin' on for daylight. Hey, Jumma! You look-out belong-it yarra-man. Bring 'im belong-it camp."

Billy kicked the fire together, put on a billy, and, while waiting for it to boil, rode round his cattle. Heralding his approach, he sang tunelessly as he rode, improvising words to a catch tune he had heard on a radio last time he had been in town.

The cattle were all in order. The cows were chewing the cud as they lay; they sighed when the man came near them—deep breaths of resignation before rising to their feet from the comfort of the grass. Royalist was in his usual place. Billy noted he was right; but, born stockman that he was, he wondered idly, without attaching any importance to it, why Royalist was not chewing the cud of quiet ease—why he was looking so

intently towards a clump of timber in the distance over which the day was beginning to break.

The black-striped yellow cow, that brindle mongrel, was sliding into the shelter of a clump of timber as Billy turned his horse to ride back to his camp. She moved easily, sliding swiftly, and as the boughs of the gidyeas closed behind her and hid her from view, Billy's flat voice, harsh and piercing and cracked on certain notes, reached her as he sang the song that had lingered in his mind:

"I'll keep your mem-o-ry of to-night."

2. *The Brindle Calf*

BILLY MARSHALL DRIFTED UP THE RIVER WITH HIS charges and delivered them in a satisfactory manner at Cootcah Downs in the Territory. The one-eyed yellow cow with the black stripes continued to run with the station herd on Yalbungra. Apart from an inclination to slink away and hide herself when men appeared, she was tractable enough, and, in common with most others of her wild breed, once her mob was in hand she was meek to the point of being subdued and servile.

The usual routine work of the year progressed: the first branding muster in March; the bullock muster and delivery during June and July; the final branding about October. The yellow cow was in them all; she was known to the stockmen.

"Keep yer eye on that there brindle cow," the head stockman Tom Mitchell advised a man. "She's quiet enough now. Her sort are always bubblin' with wild ideas. If they gets a break at all they plays merry hell. What a snortin' piker she'd be if she was a bullock! Those hen scratches on her ribs is some West Australian brand. Nobody owns her now. If she ever gets fat enough we'll kill her for beef. She'll breed a calf if she does nothin' else to pay for th' grass she's eatin'."

Summer came with a rush about the end of October.

Over night, it seemed, Nature kicked her blankets aside and lay sprawled in baking nakedness, gasping while her bed, the earth, opened in cracks beneath her, while grasses and leaves of trees drooped languidly, while birds gathered in communal flocks to await the rains which for them betokened the pairing and breeding season, and while all but the larger and more permanent waterholes dried and left caked mud as clinging traps for weaker stock. But in that area of eleven-inch annual rainfall—where commonly the temperature was above 100 degrees in the shade and was any wild guess in the sun—a bit of a dry summer was a mere nothing.

After the final branding muster of the year the station cattle had been distributed on permanent waters; active cattle work ceased for the year; the place was bedded down to await the coming of the rains. It was, in effect, the time of the annual fight with Nature when care, ceaseless and unrelenting, was needed in working the stock.

"Take 'em steady, Tom," George Leonard, the manager of Yalbungra, told his head stockman. "For every ounce of condition you knock off a beast now, it loses another pound in sympathy. We're right to the end of December without any trouble at all; we'll carry on to the end of March with a bit of luck and one thing and another; after that depends on the check-book—on how much the owners are prepared to spend to keep their herd alive, and what it will cost them. We might get storms at any time now; we're pretty sure

to get some from January to March. We're right for the time being."

About midway through December, when the sun seemed to be working in searing rays from the glazed earth, when the air was dry to the point of brittleness, when the clean-cut horizon was a razor-edge in its steeliness, and when gasping birds, too spent to sing, hung sagging wings in the scant shelter of drooping leaves of trees, the yellow cow moved slightly under the shade of some gidyea trees. Until that movement she had been an indistinguishable nothing, whose black brindle markings seemed part of the shade.

She stood clear of something that lay on the ground before her. She turned her head and looked towards the river, eight miles distant across the downs, and her hollow flanks and bloodshot eye told of her need of water. Her travail had been prolonged, and the fever of thirst was racking her; but the mother-instinct was stronger, and she turned to the new-born calf lying before her. Muttering deep down in her throat, she raked him with her tongue, guttural sounds, uncouth, almost frightening in their passion, yet softened by the intensity of her love. Then she stood back and gazed at the little fellow as he struggled to his feet and stumbled towards her.

After a few uncertain steps, the calf braced against his mother for support on his widespread legs. He knew what to do next, but he did not know how to go about it: he nuzzled her breast, between her fore legs, his pink ribbon of a tongue protruding and curling and



She turned to the new-born calf lying before her.

reaching for the teat that was not there. Some age-old instinct told the baby brain that his mother's teats must be on her breast. Then the cow moved forward so as to bring her full udder level with his nostrils.

Then that ignorant atom of life knew what to do: he sucked and slobbered; he bumped till he seemed almost to lift his mother with the shock of the impact—his own small frame shook with the energy of his bumping. He drank till his belly swelled, till he was gorged to repletion, till his breath wheezed and he was satisfied. Then, after turning round a couple of times, and with a belch of wind as his distended paunch hit the ground, he lay and slept.

His mother stood over him. Though the flies crawled on her in countless millions, clustering round the rim of her good eye and delving deep into the sightless socket, she ignored them but for an occasional shake of her head and her switching tail. She heard a string of cattle lowing in the distance, giving their well-known water call as they traveled to the river, and she did not even lift her head, for all her racked body and her parched tongue. She stayed there motionless in that sizzling heat, guarding her baby, till the little fellow woke and went again to her flanks.

This time she cut his drink short. She knew—realized from the teachings of ten thousand generations of wild mothers—that one full drink immediately following birth is all that is ever allowed the young of any animal. That full drink induces sleep, and the first strength that comes with sleep. She knew it was wise

to keep a youngster on the edge of thirst all the time; this induced him to follow the source of supply in the hope of obtaining more. In short, it put the wiser mother in the position of dictating her family's movements; otherwise, the youngster would decide for himself when he would follow his mother and where he would sleep.

The cow stepped forward while the calf was still lustily busy at her udder. Her stifle joint hit his head, knocked it aside with an abrupt movement almost stunning in its effect; but the calf took no notice whatever beyond raking the teat in his lips in a last suck that squirted the few remaining drops of milk into his mouth.

The cow stepped out, heading for the river and water. The calf followed hesitatingly, uncertain on his legs, stumbling over the inequalities on the ground.

That ground was baking hot; the stones lying on it were ovens of stored heat. As the calf's tender little hooves picked up that searing agony, it brought him to a standstill. He bellowed his pain, and, helpless in his unprotected state, he stood awkwardly.

The cow seemed to realize the position. The sun was still a couple of hours high, and no immediate relief could be expected. But she must have her drink. The life of her calf, as well as her own well-being, depended upon the replenishment of her body. She knew what to do. Guided by the instinct of countless generations of mothers, she went to her calf, nosed him

gently, pressed on his neck just in front of his shoulder—and the calf lay down on the ground.

Though that ground was hot to the point of welding heat, he seemed comfortable. He curled himself in a ring, with his head back on his flank, and as soon as he was still he was invisible—he had melted into nothingness merely by being motionless and blending with his surroundings.

The cow went on, her udders swaying from side to side under her flanks. She went in a straight line, not once deigning to look back to where her whole world lay, and so easy and effortless was the pace of that wild mother that the earth seemed to slide away from beneath her hooves as she sped over it. She knew her calf would await her return. She knew the Law. She knew that nothing on earth could induce that little fellow to move from the spot at which she had left him, and, if she did not return, a small heap of bleached bones would later mark the spot.

The cow had no more than disappeared over the horizon when another figure appeared from another direction. The calf's body picked up the vibrations of a ridden horse and transmitted them to his senses. He may not have known what it was. He only knew it was a strange vibration, therefore dangerous perhaps, and his young body seemed to coil in yet a tighter circle, and the bumping behind his shoulder showed his little heart was throbbing.

That ridden horse came nearer the calf lying in the grass. It would have passed right over him, without a

movement from the calf, when the horse suddenly saw the object on the ground and slewed aside. The rider looked down and saw the calf for the first time.

It was Tom Mitchell, the head stockman of Yalbungra.

"Helloa, Brindle," he called, and the calf seemed to shrink in on itself and one eye half opened as the dread man-sound came to it. "Where'd you come from? You're a rummy-lookin' rooster, you are. You're on'y a few hours old, an' you're lyin' out here on your own while your mum goes in for a drink. You ain't makin' no sound, an' nothin' can make you move. That's th' way for to train babies. You're a good sort of a calf, too, if it wasn't for them brindle markin's. You're a rich roan; but them markin's make you look somethin' like the picture of a tiger.

"I suppose you're out of that yaller-brindle cow with th' one eye. She runs over this side somewhere. You've got th' makin's of a good bullock in you, Brindle. If nothin' happens to you, an' th' dingoes don't get you while your mum's away for a drink, we'll sell you to works some day. An' what a lovely crown you got stamped on your forehead! Blimey, it's perfect! I never seen a better photo of a crown nor that.

"Well, you stay there, Brindle, ol' man," Tom concluded. "Your mum's comin' back to you so long as she's alive. Nothin' can't stop her. Don't you worry about that, Brindle. Th' sun's goin' down soon, an' you'll be cooler. S'long, Brindle. I'll be seein' you

later, ol' boy, an' I'll teach you what cattle work is as you grows older."

The calf composed himself, his heart-throbs lessening as the ground vibrations of the horse faded in the distance. Still he lay where his mother had put him. Once a mob of bush cattle passed within a few yards of him, and hope sprang high in the little fellow's mind as they approached him. But he did not move. He may have rolled his eyes in the direction from which the sound came; he may have had the inclination to rise and run to them in the hope his mother would be there. But he never moved, and, as the sound of the cattle died away, he seemed to sigh resignedly as he settled himself to await his mother's return. He knew the Law. His instinctive knowledge may have told him that the Law must be obeyed; disobedience meant death. He remained.

The sun set and, almost as quickly as the turned leaves of a book, it was night and dark. Strange noises and weird whisperings came to that baby in the grass. They may have been disquieting; perhaps, to his small imagination, they portended danger and death. He never moved. A night-prowling cat stalked and slew a stone plover within a few yards of his nose. The rusty shriek of the bird and the spitting fury of the cat combined to make a ghastly noise. It would have been more than enough to make a thousand aged bullocks rush from night-camp. But the calf never moved his body, though his ears did twitch in the direction of the sound of murder.

After what must have been an eternity, with his little belly craving food, with his aching muscles cramped from lying in one position, the calf heard the vibrations of a single cow returning. He may have known it was his mother. An instinct may have warned him, or he may have reasoned that those straight-directed hooves could only be making for a fixed spot. He never moved, though a slight muscular tremor ran over his body.

The cow was returning. She had gone straight to the waterhole for her drink. On the way in she had met many mobs of cattle feeding out from the hole. After the sociable habit of bush cattle, they had tried to detain her to join their mobs. But she had gone straight through them, brushed aside the advances of bulls, and made for the water. Having had her drink, she had taken a direct line back.

It was eight miles from the river to her hidden calf. There were no landmarks, no cattle pads to lead her straight, and only her instinct and mother-love to guide her. In all those thousands of square miles of unfenced country, there must have been hundreds and hundreds of spots exactly like the one where she had left her calf; there were certainly millions of tussocks of Mitchell grass identical with the grass on which her calf lay. But the mother never hesitated. She did not reason: she knew. She went straight to the spot where her baby lay; she leaned over him with a little crooning sob of love in her throat; she touched him to life.

The calf knew, too. As soon as his mother's muzzle

touched him, he rose to his feet. He stretched himself elaborately and, for a little fellow so new to life, he did it surprisingly well and took a lot of pleasure in it. Then he went to his mother's flank and drank till she brushed him aside, to move away and lead him over the cooled ground where they could mingle with other mobs of cattle that ran on that area of the station.

3. *The Telepathists*

THE BRINDLE COW, WITH HER CALF HUGGING HER flank, fed in during the night towards the river frontages. There she met other mobs of cattle. When they mingled with the first mob, the calf's eyes opened in bewilderment. He kept closer to his mother, leaning against her till he accustomed himself to the strangeness of his position. Then, as his mother was feeding contentedly, he lay down and slept. When he woke he was hungry. He went confidently to the flank of the cow nearest to him, butting her with his muzzle as he edged along her flank. Now came surprising disillusionment to that calf as his education in life began, for the cow lifted the hind leg nearer to him and sent him sprawling on the ground.

He picked himself up stumblingly, allcomical consternation, and in a cracked falsetto he bellowed his confusion and embarrassment. His mother knew that call; she could pick it as one in hundreds. She hurried to him, slobbered him with her rasping tongue, crooned to him, comforted him as he went to her udders. And he never made the same mistake again.

While he was with that feeding mob, another calf came to scrutinize the newcomer. Brindle spread his four legs wide, his tail held high—on the hair-trigger

of flight if danger threatened. Perhaps in his baby mind all things were prospectively risky. He stood there while the second calf smelt him over. When the other gave a skip in the air, waved his tail, and bounded away with a sharp bellow, Brindle knew that this was an invitation to a game.

As he went after him, he tried to follow and to imitate the other fellow's actions; but he was too new to the world, too uncertain on his feet, too unbalanced to jump and buck as the other did—that veteran calf who was at least three days old. Brindle sprawled and stumbled, tripped and skidded along the ground on his nose, getting dirty up his nostrils. Soon he realized that this game was a little too advanced for him. He stood and cocked his top lip ludicrously to dislodge the irritating grains of dirt that had stuck there.

The other calf returned to Brindle. He smelt him; he rubbed against him; then he put his head square against the crowned forehead and pushed.

Brindle knew what this implied! He may have been only a few hours old; he may have had a heap to learn; but he knew instinctively what a fight was. His fathers, right back to prehistoric days, had had to fight for their rights and privileges; now Brindle dropped the cloak of a thousand years in the flash of a second and responded to his instincts: he fought.

The little fellows battled mightily. They strained and pushed, their heads low to the ground, their backs arched, their tails waving like gay banners in battle, and they grunted like leviathans in action. They fought,

heaving desperately, struggling furiously, till Brindle's baby legs gave way beneath him and he fell to the ground.

He floundered valiantly as he strove to get to his feet, to rise and continue the battle—to prove that he, Brindle, unknown son of an anonymous line of heroes, could fight to the death. But his mother checked that worthy ambition. She pushed between the battling warriors, shoved the other fellow aside without ceremony and with scant respect for his rights as victor, and, standing over her son, licked him and mumbled loving messages deep down in her throat.

Daylight found that mob on the edge of the downs country, only about four miles from water, working in, and feeding as they went, to the waterhole in the river. Brindle's feet had hardened by that time; he followed his mother strongly, if with no great certainty of step.

The bush cattle gathered at the water gradually till, about an hour before noon, the last of the far-feeding stragglers were at the hole.

There were countless interludes as that herd of mixed cattle rested under the trees at the waterhole. Ardent bulls inspired by jealousy or passion roved through, seeking what they might gain, find, or steal. Other bulls opposed their ambitions, resulting in little wars which drew bovine spectators even as humans gather to such bouts. Sexless steers bellowed, waged mock wars, raked up dust, and played at being fully sexed bulls. Mickeys, feeling the first flush of lust, sought to inspire as they swelled their necks, bellowed

in hoarse imitation of older bulls, and swaggered as they strode past what they doubtless thought were the admiring eyes of cows. The younger calves were a source of endless worry to their mothers. Their inquisitive little minds would prompt them to wander, to poke into places where children had no right to be, to get lost in their adventuring, and then to bleat helplessly for their mothers to come and comfort them. The cows themselves—old, sedate mothers of many calves, and grandmothers of small herds—congregated under the shade of trees, and seemed to be gossiping and exchanging scandal even as their human counterparts have been known to do.

The brindle cow, and others with calves of like newness, drew away from the water as soon as their first thirst was sated. Taking their calves with them, they proceeded to the safety of comparative solitude a quarter of a mile or so from the water. Thus they were the first to note the two men riding up the river and coming to the dinner camp. They lifted their heads, swung their ears in the direction of the riding men; almost they seemed to concentrate.

Immediately it seemed as if all the cattle camped about the water sensed the approach of the men—of George Leonard, the manager, and Tom Mitchell, his head stockman.

“Hulloa, Brindle, how goes it?” Tom called to the calf as he passed. “This is th’ bloke I was tellin’ you about, Mr. Leonard,” he added to the manager. “He’s out of that mongrel brindle cow what come in from th’

West Aus side. Look at th' crown on his forehead. If he wasn't a mongrel, he'd be a good sort of a calf, wouldn't he?"

"Nothing could be good with those brindle markings, Tom," Leonard replied. "He's burly enough, and he'll grow into a weighty bullock with age; but he's only rubbish. Let's have a look at these cattle on the water. There's about twelve hundred. That's about all the cattle running on this country. We've got the grass to carry 'em for a few months yet, and this hole is permanent. They're right so long as no more cattle come in this way. Keep 'em down to about twelve hundred, Tom. If any more gather here, let me know and we'll shift some out to the bores. These cattle are right to the wet season, provided we get a season."

Midway through the afternoon the cattle stirred from the hole and fed out on the downs. By sunset there were only odd stragglers left. Brindle, responding with instinctive obedience to his mother's unspoken orders, lay under the shade of his tree while she went in for a final drink after most of the others had left the hole. Though ignoring the hundreds of others who went by, he sprang to his feet unhesitatingly as she passed him with no sound and apparently without recognition. He joined her and mingled with the mob as they fed out on the downs.

Brindle did not "learn" the roles of the herd—he just absorbed them automatically as part of his breeding. They did not come to him piecemeal, one lesson at a time; he left the waterhole with his mother on

that second evening of his life wise with all the wisdom of the mob, with an accurate knowledge of what was expected of him at every period in his growing life.

Early next morning, when the mob had begun to feed in towards the river, Brindle and other calves of his age stood in a curious circle watching a heifer—as young as they—gasp away the dregs of her life. She had been calved an hour or two earlier than Brindle, and—like him—had essayed to follow her mother over the hot ground. That baking earth, with its searing pebbles, had blistered the soft, wet shells of her hooves, and they had peeled. Now, with thousands of flies feasting on the suppurating stumps of flesh, with thousands of ants gnawing bits from her living body, the calf lay—mercifully numb to pain, it seemed—and drew shuddering breaths as she died. Behind her, the tracks on the ground revealed her last agony: too sore to stand, she had stumbled to her knees, and long trails in the dust showed where she had dragged herself forward on her knees in an effort to make the shade in which she lay.

Now the heartless little audience were watching their sister die a victim to Nature's insensate cruelty; one callous fiend went so far as to rub her body with his stubby horns and bellow in mock anger as if challenging it to fight!

The cattle worked in towards the river and water—long strings of them, some feeding as they walked, raising ribbons of dust that hovered a few feet above

the ground, and then blew to wisps as they were caught by the eternal southeast winds.

The waterhole itself was clearly noticeable: a film of dust rose from it, showing early drinkers already at the spot; the trees about it were bare limbs denuded of leaves. Up and down the course of the river the coolibahs showed full foliage; at the hole itself—drinking-place for birds as well as animals—the corellas in their thousands had amused themselves and whetted their bills by nipping off leaves and green twigs. Now leafless, the limbs looked like white skeletons as the corellas covering them peeled off bark between drinks.

Three or four miles out from water, at the last clump of gidyeas, a curious little episode took place before the cows walked across the bare downs to water. No human eye could note what observance was followed; no man's ear could hear any order given. It was methodical in its action, so regular that it might have been rehearsed a dozen times, so ordinary that none but the participants paid any attention to it. Six or eight of the younger calves, Brindle among them, left their mothers, congregated in the shade of those trees and stood there unconcernedly as their mothers went on and left them without once turning their heads to note what their babies were doing. And the greatest marvel of all was that an aged cow stayed with them, taking her place as nursemaid or guardian. She did it matter-of-factly, as though it were her duty, as though she had been appointed by vote of the majority.

The mob went on. No mother bellowed to the calf

she had left behind; no calf bleated for its mother. The "guardian" stood in the shade of a tree, chewed her cud, swished her tail to fend off the flies, and kept an eye on her wards.

Any calf left by himself would have lain in the grass, coiled in a circle, invisible and motionless. But these little fellows were amusing themselves, though they did not stray from the trees. They lay down, stood up, played, slept, pretended to mouth straws of grass—apparently they knew exactly what they were expected to do. Obviously, they were too young to tramp across the downs, to mingle with a big mob at water. But probably the real purpose of all this was to give the mothers time to drink at ease, to chew the cud and contemplate, to go back again and have another full drink before leaving the water. In any case, it was the regular thing among big mobs of mixed cattle running on large areas.

A couple of hours went by. The calves, tired of playing and wandering about their limited area, were all lying down, their tiny jaws working on cuds that needed no chewing. Suddenly the old cow lifted her head, stiffened, and ceased to work her jaws. She sensed danger. As if responding to the same trigger-pressure, the calves immediately froze into immobility.

A red-yellow streak rustled through the grass and stood out clearly as it reached the fringe of the bare country surrounding the trees. A dingo!

The cow never hesitated. She charged. With fire in her eyes, hate in her heart, and fury in her bearing,

with her tail high and her head low, tongue lolling, mouth open, splayed front hooves striking blindly, she went to the attack with a strangled sob of fear mixed with anger.

The dingo evaded that charge so easily that he almost seemed to smile as he dodged to one side. He slipped from beneath those hammering hooves, turned on himself in one action and, with the speed of light itself, darted among the cluster of calves. It was a marvel of balance and co-ordination of muscular effort. And, great as it was, a greater miracle was behind him! That dingo had no more than reached the first calf, with his head swung to rip and tear, when a thundering of hooves behind him made him defer that strike till he should first have dealt with the cow.

The hideous death-dance continued. The dingo, by pace and guile, strove to get past the cow's protection and in among the calves; the cow, by courage and devotion to duty, to block that dog, to get on top of him when he evaded her, before he could do any harm to her charges.

It would have seemed hours to an onlooker, and it must have spelt an eternity to the cow, though a scant twelve minutes had passed. The cow was a disheveled mass of winded, slobbering, filthy fury, for—like most cattle—she immediately had a bowel upset when hot or excited. The dingo, with his jaws agape, slightly winded but quite unruffled, sat on his haunches and grinned as he seemed to study a new method of at-

tack. The two principals eyed each other as they observed a temporary truce.

The dingo did nothing; he just sat there and bided his time. The cow, too excited to stand still, glared at him and swung about as imaginary noises and imagined attacks came at her from other directions. The calves, too, had picked up the infection of excitement. The Law held them to the shelter of the trees under which they were camped; but they moved restlessly as, on the edge of breaking and scattering, they stuttered impatient feet.

The dingo continued to do nothing; he was waiting for something to happen. He turned his head once, twice, and—at the third turn—that for which he had waited slid into view. It was another dingo!

The new dingo came on unconcernedly. She barely bothered to look at the calves and the cow guarding them. She seemed to know exactly what was there, how it was placed, and what she had to do. She knew just where every calf lay, what cover there was to afford her points from which to attack; in fact, she seemed acquainted with every possibility in the situation.

The guardian cow also summed up the position. She was beside herself with anxiety, but—gallant mother that she was—she prepared to do battle to the limit against impossible odds.

The new dingo slid through the grass round to the spot appointed for her attack. Quite unconcerned, she pounced on a carney lizard that scuttled from under a tussock of grass. She took her stance and seemed to

be awaiting the starting signal when a drumming of hooves made her look behind—whereupon she dropped her ears, bared her teeth in anger and, with her tail between her legs, slunk away from the line of charge.

There were seven calves in that mob, in addition to the one belonging to the guardian cow. And now bellying across the downs, in a straight line, udders swaying, with fire in their eyes and fury in their hearts, seven mothers came racing from the direction of the river! They had been called—an inexplicable something had told them their young were in danger; and they had thrown those four long miles behind them in response to the urgency of the message.

Every calf in the mob started to its feet and jumped in fear as those cows charged in among them. Six of them settled down after the first wild spring, soothed by the touch of a mother's nose and the mumbling croon of love. The seventh little fellow sped straight on, his tail and head high, fear showing in every line as he bounded in erratic leaps over the grass.

The mother of that fleeing calf followed him. She was too excited herself to calm her baby, and perhaps her actions increased his fear. And while she followed him, with her eyes only on him, running blind and stumbling as she ran, a red streak shot through the grass from either side and, with a gurgle and a gasp, that calf faltered and sank to the ground in death! Having broken the Law by running away, it now paid the penalty.

The two dingoes sat on their haunches at some dis-

tance from the corpse and licked their lips. They could afford to wait. They knew it. They knew the bereft mother would slobber her young, would mourn over it for half an hour or more, and then, distracted, would wander on and leave it. It was their business to know such things. They also knew, without looking, that the other calves were now safe with their mothers and of no further interest.

As the dingoes sat there, alert, in spite of their look of casual indifference, to any mad charge the frantic mother might make, one of the dogs shifted its head aside to listen to some birds passing overhead. It was a flight of budgerigars going to water—a tight-packed acre or more of opalescent birds, ten or twenty or thirty thousand speeding in several layers. Suddenly without any visible warning, a fear of hawks seemed to strike them. The mob wheeled as one bird, darted to the right, shot downwards at a sharp angle, spun in a dizzy circle, seemed to pick itself up, straightened out, and continued in a direct line to the river.

And in the torn and bubbling air left behind them, where biting wings had recently gripped and maneuvered at lightning speed, with wing-tips touching, with birds above and below, not one feather disturbed from a brushed body floated down to tell of the recent passage of a flock controlled by a master mind that made it act as one bird!

4. *The Battle of Life*

THE SEASON CONTINUED DRY; THE WIND THAT CAME pouring from the southeast seemed to have been passed through a furnace, the last vestige of moisture drained from it, and then, in all its snapping brittleness, to have been let loose to soak up what water and green foliage it could find. Each morning saw a red sun cut its way into a clear sky; each night saw a red sun sink in sullen heat with stabbing rays of crimson fury.

The cattle's coats grew harsh, brittle, on edge. At night when two beasts chanced to run together, or when a dry tuft of tail drew lingeringly over a dryer coat, blue flashes of phosphorescent light flamed from the contact. And the same happened to men unrolling their swags or rubbing flannel on their hair. The little world of Yalbungra and its environs seemed charged with the static electricity always produced by excessive dryness, as that world and all its living things awaited the coming of the rains.

Birds gathered in huge flocks, thronging the river stretches where permanent water was to be found in the big holes. None of them went about the business of life, of procreation and increase—they were all too busy with their own preservation. Perhaps they knew, in the dry end of the year, that they could not provide for

other lives in addition to their own. Even the waxbills, those most prolific of all finches, ceased their mating for the time and, in dust-colored clouds, spilling sibilant syllables, they drifted up and down the river from water to water, never venturing more than half a mile or more from the channels.

All the birds seemed happy enough, and perhaps that communal meeting at the end of the year was part of their social program. The whistling ducks particularly gathered in one huge flock—ducks from many miles distant. They made the rounds of the drying waters, seeming to delight in having muck to muddle and filth to filter. In that little more than a scum of inch-deep water they ferreted out all that was good for their digestions, and it could be assumed that, on leaving the bare mud behind them when the hole dried, they had drained it of all digestible life. The corellas gathered by thousands, and, when they settled to feed on the ground, a huge counterpane of white seemed to be spread over a few acres. The budgerigars—those bush originals of the love-birds of commerce and cages—dashed from place to place, aerial blankets of dazzling green flashing for a second or two, then just a distant smudge even while their gay chattering seemed to linger still on the air.

All the animals were in reasonably good condition and comparatively strong. The cattle, except for some weakling or some aged cow with a young calf at foot, were doing well and could hang on for an indefinite period. The ceaseless heat, the unending furnace of the

day, must have sapped some of their energy. Indeed, that same heat applied artificially would doubtless have slain them in thousands; but as a natural process it was accepted naturally.

Brindle was doing well. His sire had given him size, constitution, and quality; from his mother he had got that toughness which enabled him to survive and flourish under adverse conditions. His mother had the ease and grace of action to cover long miles, to forage far and wide, to get the best of the grasses. Her udders were always full; Brindle had a plenteous supply of milk. He was strong and healthy, and he grew amazingly. He had now reached the age when he accompanied his mother to water, mingled among other cattle, and wandered with others of his age through the *lignum*, exploring.

But the season continued dry; the grass was growing sparse and begrimed with dust for a couple of miles from the river frontages; the waters were receding, and some of the bigger holes were breaking into chains of water. The top of Corella Hole, which was the main water at which the cattle met, had drawn away and left a miniature lake of about a hundred yards or more in length, half that width, and with a depth of from a foot to eighteen inches. It was dirty, befouled by cattle walking through it, so thickened with mud that dead fish floated with white bellies upwards; and kite hawks and other carrion perched on the surrounding trees.

To Brindle and his half-dozen mates this seemed an ideal play-place. There was no reason why they should

play the game they did—it was just an hereditary game that their parents had played at their ages: they stamped into that foul water, Brindle leading. They stalked about the hole, up and down and across it, round the edges and through the middle of it. They went individually, and in couples, and at times they proceeded in a string. Though each unit did as it pleased, their manner was uniform: they walked carefully, with a grim seriousness that was out of place on such baby faces; occasionally, for no reason, one would suddenly dab with its muzzle at the water, and cock a derisive lip when that funny stuff splashed up its nostril. And, particularly, each tail was held high, perpendicular, stiff as a broom handle, with the tuft of hair at the end falling back over that flag-pole like a limp banner. Though it was all quite ridiculous, it was conducted with the solemn fervor of a religious ritual, and it may have had some meaning. . . .

After an hour or so, when the rite had been completed, the calves came ashore one by one. Each, as soon as it touched dry ground, spread its four legs wide and shook its head and body in an effort to dry itself—to dry a body that was not wet above the knees! Then, when Brindle gave a bit of a skip and a bound, flirted his tail, and emitted a sharp bellow, they all joined in as, leaping and racing, bucking and kicking, they sped back to the main mob. Their mothers came out to meet them, to lick them, to croon over them, to ask anxiously if all was well with them. Thus, in spite of the dry time, the calves seemed to knock some fun out of life.

There was another and smaller waterhole about eight miles down the river. This was called the Yellow Pup Hole—named for some long defunct and unknown aboriginal's dog, or (in the cynical manner of the big bush) it may have referred to a half-caste baby. The management of Yalbungra was keeping a watchful eye on the Yellow Pup. It was drying. It was some three hundred yards long and some fifty wide, and its depth of water was from two to three feet. There were about twelve hundred cattle running on it, doing well, and the area it served was fairly well grassed. Though its life was limited, it was useful at the end of the year when country was restricted.

Ted Malbon, a drover, was bringing a late mob up the river—a lot of about three hundred good cows with which to form a stud herd on Rocklea Station. He put those cows, when fairly thirsty, in on the Yellow Pup. They took it in a face, wading abreast it along the full length from bank to bank, sipping as they waded, stirring the mud and polluting the water. They completed their drink, came out on the bank and rested content in the shade of the coolibahs.

But in an hour or less that little mob of three hundred good cows had ruined a water which would have lasted twelve hundred cattle the best part of three months! It was liquid soup when they had finished with it, fouled by filth, with fish already showing their bellies through the thick surface as they turned over and died!

Ted took his cows on and continued his trip up the

river. When the station cattle came in next day for their mid-day drink, even the most hardened of them turned up their noses at the slimy and repulsive muck that faced them. They strode into it, smelled it, sniffed their disgust—and aggravated the situation: they waded into the hole, seeking fresh water, and churned it to a further gluey consistency. By the time all the cattle running that area had come in, the hole was a moving mass of cattle plowing through liquid mud, bellowing their discontent, adding to the filth and spoiling the water. Some appeared to find comedy even in the midst of tragedy: they snorted and pretended to take fright as a big yellowbelly or black bream, stranded on the mud, flapped desperately in its dying agonies.

Tom Mitchell made his report at the head station: "Th' Yellow Pup's settled. Them Rocklea cows took it in a face an' settled it. Most of th' cattle shifted themselves up to th' Corella. I gathered up a couple of hun'ed left and took 'em down to th' Bullock Hole."

"That makes too many on Corella," Leonard commented. "There'll be more cattle coming in there, now that the river's been disturbed. You'd better take a thousand of them out to Split-Link Bore, Tom. There's a thousand there now. That added thousand will put that bore right. Mrs. Leonard had arranged a bit of a Christmas for you fellows, but the party will have to wait—you'll shift those cattle first and have your bit of a spree later. I'll go out to Split-Link and let 'em know you're coming."

Tom took his camp to Corella. He and his men met

the first thousand or so cattle coming in to that water to drink.

"We'll hold 'em till we get th' full mob," Tom advised. "Don't let 'em drink. It's no good takin' full cattle to a new water. We want 'em thirsty when we gets 'em there. Then they'll drink well an' remember th' spot. If we takes full cattle off good water they won't drink when they gets there. When they feels thirsty they'll come straight back to where they knows good water is. If they're thirsty then, they'll drink heavy and stay put. Hold 'em out till we gets th' thousan' an' we'll make a start. It's twelve miles from here to Split-Link, across th' downs, and it's goin' to be piccaninny daylight before we lets 'em go tomorrow mornin'."

Tom, with two boys and two white men helping him, got his mob together and started them for Split-Link. It was a hard job: the cattle were thirsty and wanted to make in to Corella; his horses, though strong, had to be handled with care; though those cattle were well handled, and used to being worked, they verged on open mutiny at being taken from their accustomed run.

After an hour or so of strenuous yet careful work, he had the mob "bumped into shape"—as he himself would express it—and, at about four in the afternoon, some three miles out from the river, the cattle were beginning to work as one mob and to walk confidently in the manner of stock which have an idea they know where they are going. All seemed well, and the trip

—again as Tom would express it—was “goin’ to be a cakewalk.”

A flying scud of rain seemed to materialize out of nowhere. It came pelting across the downs, spreading its sweet wet-earth smell ahead of it, and some three useless pints of rain fell on the cattle before the scud packed up and disappeared into the nothingness from which it had come.

The harm was done! That wet smell had disorganized the thirsty cattle. From being a mob of a thousand worked as one body, they turned to that many single units, each going its own way, each intent on a drink, each with the fixed determination to make back to where it knew good water awaited it—the Corella Hole.

“Let ’em go,” Tom told his men. “Come off it, Chinderah!” he called to a boy. “Our horses can’t stand this sort of thing. We’ll get ’em again tomorrow and make a job of ’em. We’ll start a bit later so’s to dodge any storms what might be flyin’ about.”

They put the cattle together again on the morrow. With the strange capriciousness that governs stock—quite unpredictable by any men—on that day the cattle were more tractable, easier to handle, and more inclined to go in the direction in which they were driven. On that afternoon, also, there were no meteorological disturbances, however small, and nothing to disturb the mob. And this time, well in the mob, solicitous of her calf, nervous, on edge and ready to break and run, the

one-eyed cow with her brindle bull calf traveled to Split-Link Bore.

About midnight, with half the distance covered, the mob halted for a spell at a scattered clump of blood-woods on some rough country. The cattle were in hand and being worked. They knew the rules: they were to lie in the shade of trees while they rested. But it was midnight, the full moon was at its zenith, and the black shadows stood out clear-cut as an etching. Such shades offered them no protection at night. It was the Law: the cattle lay in the shades, pretended to dodge a non-existent heat, and chewed the cud while they rested.

They turned uninterested eyes on the men as they changed to fresh horses which a boy had brought, and, as the whips barked their messages, they rose to their feet, stretched elaborately, grunted and sighed, and took up the march to Split-Link.

Many of the smaller calves tired as they neared their destination. Clustered at the tail of the mob, they plugged along sturdily, heads low, mouths agape, and gathered in the shade of every tree the mob passed on its way to the bore.

"Take them brave little fellows steady," Tom advised. "You go up on th' wing, Joe. Th' cattle knows where they're goin' now, an' they don't want no steerin'. I'll stay with these game little roosters. A man'll settle 'em if he tries to bump 'em along: they've got to be coaxed. Come on, th' little feller. You're th' game little hen, you are. Come along, sweethearts. You can do it. If on'y your ol' mums would call out to you it would

help you along a bit. They won't. Them ol' cows is too thirsty to think about their babies. They've got a idea they'll come back for you little blokes after they've had a drink. Stick to it, little 'uns. You'll see it out!"

The calves plodded on. There was something grand in that baby courage which kept exhausted limbs moving, tiny feet tramping over heavy and rough ground. They could not have had the remotest idea where they were going, what it was all about, or whether there was anything at the other end. They kept going because the Law said they must follow the mob.

Brindle was not among those laggards. He was tired, and his hind feet dragged a bit; but he stuck to his mother, his superior strength rising above the difficulties of the road, and, though his head was low and his tongue lolling slightly, when his mother ran from the wing of the mob when a man came near her, Brindle stumbled over tussocks and picked himself up as he ran at her side. Brindle had quite a few miles in reserve.

Joe came back to the tail of the mob and gave his message to Tom, the head stockman: "Th' leaders is on th' pads goin' to th' bore. They're startin' to string."

"Take Chinderah with you an' let 'em string," said Tom. "I'll stick by these little blokes for a while. When it gets a bit lighter, I'll leave 'em an' come up to th' lead. Let 'em string, Joe. Let 'em get as long a lead as they can—so long as they're runnin' th' pads leadin' to th' bore."

About an hour later, when the well-known "water-call" of the leaders had livened the whole mob, Tom

rode on to the lead. The sinking moon was fighting a losing battle with the growing light in the east, and the shadows, once so sharply defined, were now blurred and indistinct as twin lights from opposite directions tried to control them. The leaders, three miles away, were calling as they ran to the troughs; the tailers answered weakly and tried to spur themselves to new effort.

"You an' Chinderah hold 'em out there as soon as they have a drink," Tom told Joe. "They'll camp if you steady 'em a bit. Don't let 'em go away. They're strung out nice now, comin' in steady, an' they'll all get a drink. Just steady 'em over there after they've had a drink."

Tom sat on his horse, watching the cattle come in, and ready to intervene if the occasion demanded it.

A poddy calf had been resting under a near clump of trees as the first of the cattle raced to the water in the trough. The poddy was less than a month old, a battler, and wise in the ways of the world. He waited till the stock were so engaged at the trough that they paid no attention to minor matters. Sneaking along behind them, he found a cow with a plenteous udder and an enticing supply of milk. He knew what to do, and he did it. The cow, otherwise engaged, protested only to the extent of stamping her hind feet. The poddy was used to that. The cow continued to drink. So did the poddy. At last, with an intuition that something was wrong, the cow turned and, between gulps of water, knocked that poddy sprawling in the dust.

The cow turned again to the trough. The poddy picked himself up with a show of unconcern quite understandable to one reared in a world of hard knocks. He did not go near that first cow again. He sought another, and found her.

The cattle continued to string in, lowing as they came, drank in a comparatively orderly manner, and moved out to where Joe and Chinderah steadied them. There, with a pretence of elaborate care, each selected a place on which to lie, dropped to the ground with a stertorous grunt and a belching of wind, and promptly began to chew the cud and view life from the contentment of a full belly.

The poddy continued busy. Cows with calves were proportionately more numerous at the tail of the mob—and wet cows meant more milk. His jaws were white with froth and saliva, his belly distended, his props of legs making him resemble a cask on pegs; but he was content. Before the last of the mob came to water, the poddy strolled over to the trees from which he had come—trees already in the possession of other cattle. But the poddy was used to that sort of thing, and he found a shrub too small to attract any but an outcast. It suited him: it was within touch of the trough to which came thirsty cows, too busy drinking to pay attention to such trivial matters as a poddy fighting for his life.

The sun was an hour or more high when the last of the driven cattle came to the bore, when the brave little battlers at the tail of the mob called weakly in reply to mothers who could give a thought to their babies now

that their own pressing needs had been satisfied. All the mob had drunk properly, and already some of the leaders were returning to the trough for a second sip.

The men were red-eyed, tired, listless. Though they gave no outward evidence of it, they were elated by the knowledge of a big job well done, by that inward satisfaction which is the vehicle that carries their class over many stiff obstacles.

Tom took upon himself one of the privileges which his position of boss gave him. "You fellows," he said, "can let your horses go, an' have a camp. If you're as sleepy as I am, you want no rockin' to your slumbers. I'll just watch these cattle for a bit. When I'm sure they're settled down properly I'll let me horse go an' join you in a bit of shut-eye."

5. *The First Adventure*

THE CATTLE SETTLED DOWN AT SPLIT-LINK. ODD ONES—a very few—returned to the water in the river; but most of them were content to stay on that new feed and man-made water.

Split-Link was a bore twelve miles out from the river, on the downs country. It was equipped with a couple of receiving-tanks, aggregating 60,000 gallons, a length of troughing, and a steam engine. It was an emergency water only, used not more than three months in the year. For the rest of the time it was only a landmark.

By some queer sense certain stock seemed to know when the bore was operating. The mere fact of smoke coming from the stack of the engine was as good as a printed message to cattle who saw it that water was available. To a certain extent, this was understandable: the bore had been placed there for the convenience of cattle when natural waters were scarce. But the action of the birds was mystifying.

Waxbill finches are noted for never being seen half a mile from water. Yet that bore had not been in operation two days when clouds of the little fellows rested on the edges of the troughs, dipped their beaks in the water, and sucked it up as a horse does—one long drink

instead of the sip and gargle of hens and other birds. Many attempted to drink from the tank itself: they slid down the corrugated iron sides, unable to gain a toe-hold, and floated on the surface a bedraggled heap of feathers till they drowned. The pumper, a man with a heart as well as a brain, threw bits of pine boards into the tank; and those small floating islands made landing places for the finches.

Early in the morning, before the cattle came in, the corellas were drinking on both sides of the troughs, mischievous ones whetting their bills against the stringers on which the troughs rested. The birds lined the structure in unbelievable numbers, and squabbled and rose in clouds when the pumper walked near them.

The pumper was old in the ways of birds at pumps. "I remember a case on Rocklands," he said, "where ninety-one of these fellows was dropped in one shot from a double-barrel' gun. I seen th' boss on Walgra Station drop six birds with one bullet from a twenty-two W.R.F. rifle."

During the afternoon, drawing on towards sunset, the galahs came in and skimmed the water in the tanks with their breasts as they sipped a drink on the wing; the plain turkeys stalked in with that disdainful air of world-ownership which seems to proclaim their right to drink where they wish; last of all, just as the sun was setting, the pigeons came on whistling wings—the top-knots and the doves—and they, drinking in the manner of the finches, sucked up their needs in short time and departed.

During the night, when but few cattle, if any, came to water, other animals came and took their drinks. The kangaroos soon learned there was water to be had, and they came, thumping the ground, the old men grunting and snorting like pigs and brumby stallions. They drank according to their needs; when dry they sucked up their water in long gulps; when the edge had been taken from their thirst they lapped like dogs till the water ran from their nostrils and they were content. A few emus came, approached stealthily, sank back on their haunches while they reached long necks over the edge of the trough and took their drinks in long and gurgling swallows.

Whatever their style of approach, each group left the water in a style dictated by one motive: they slid, or dodged, or wriggled, or side-stepped—in order to evade possible enemies. It was an instinct with them, a knowledge which had become Law. In the long ago they had known that predatory beasts lay in wait at watering places, there to pounce upon their prey; and that the attack would be made after the animal had completed its drink, when it was laden with water, slow in action and surfeited. Though the predatory beast was by now but a hazy memory, the Law remained: they must dodge attack when leaving water.

Occasionally dingoes came slinking in to water at night. They were shadows in movement, nebulous nothings that drifted over the ground, drank furtively, and had a way of stopping short in the middle of the drink as if aghast at the noise their lapping made. They would

pause, listen, sink into immobility, and wait before continuing the drink; then they would slide away as silently and unobtrusively as they had come.

And when the sun was barely reddening the eastern horizon the cattle could be seen in strings in the distance as they worked their way to the water.

The brindle cow was doing well. She worked wide miles and foraged on the outskirts of the feeding mobs. A couple of times she had been prompted to make back to the river, to the natural waters there as opposed to the artificial improvements at which she had her daily drink. Perhaps some mob law actuated her, a 'law stronger in her because of her wild strain. She stayed with the mob with which she ran and, with them, took up her beat at Split-Link Bore; but she was one of the few night drinkers—the wild streak in her blood demanded that concession.

Brindle was doing well, growing fast, strong, almost fat, and lusty. His mother ranged far, getting the best and freshest feed, and her udders were always full. He seemed to be enjoying life, and gradually he was learning to feed.

At first, and for a week or more, his first attempts at chewing grass were only caricatures of the art of eating. Doubtless he had wondered what prompted his mother to put her head down, open her mouth, and eat that dry stuff. What first started him may have been curiosity, or perhaps it was instinct. He took a mouthful of the grass, but it hurt his tender little gums when he dragged it through his lips before snapping it. He had

opened his mouth, let the grass fall, and cocked a derisive nose at the idea of doing anything further with the stuff. It was a day or two before he made a further effort.

This time he essayed to chew the stuff. It was a ridiculous effort: instead of chewing with the circular action of a grinding machine, his jaws went up and down in perpendicular strokes which only bruised the grass without masticating it. But, strangely enough—though he only *chawed* the grass, which required *chewing*—when he lay down to chew the cud of predigested food which needed no grinding, his jaws worked with exactly the same action as that of his mother and the older cattle when they were making their cuds more digestible.

Brindle soon learned how to handle grasses. He even condescended to sip an occasional drop of water at the troughs, though that insipid stuff had no appeal for him while his mother's bounteous udders were at his disposal.

The best part of a month went by, the cattle settled in, with the prospects only fair, when a sizzling streak of lightning, followed by rocking thunder, heralded the packing up of clouds from the north. The cattle were disturbed as the sweet smell of wet earth came to them; they bellowed a welcome to it, and some began to wander. Then the rain came with a rush, sweeping in horizontal sheets, leaving puddles lying on the ground, making soft mud which clung to hooves.

Next day the management of Yalbungra was per-

turbed: Was the rain the forerunner of the real thing, or had it been only sufficient to upset the cattle and send them wandering?

The answer came that night: rocking thunder, rain that drummed incessantly, lightning that flashed and flared in mad dances across the skies. It was the season—the real thing!

The earth soaked gradually, and it seemed almost as if a huge sigh of content came from it as water gushed down yawning cracks which had gaped for months. Ant pads began to trickle; they ran into the bigger cattle pads, and the water swirling along them carried stems of grass and muddy bubbles of froth as it played at being a real flood in miniature.

The gullies filled and ran into the creeks; the creeks took all they had to offer and, in turn, trickled slowly as they filled before sweeping with full banks to deliver their loads to the river. The river came to life slowly. Almost it seemed that it drowsed and turned restlessly in its bed before waking from its long sleep. Then, tentatively, feeling its way with brown trickles of water, it proved a passage along its own channels and came to life in lengths at a time. It gained in volume and courage till, full to its banks, with its billabongs a network of water, it took everything in its face, swept rubbish before it, covered dead bodies of cattle and, with foam in its teeth and spume on its breast, it started its long journey to Lake Eyre—to the center from which there was no outlet to the sea.

The earth responded almost over night. After that

first storm there may have been a pin-point of green showing when the sun went down. Next morning it was a new world, a clean world, a fresh and sweet world covered in diaphanous green, throbbing with life, with the echoing calls of birds and with the harsh croak of frogs suddenly wakened to life after many dormant months hidden in dry swamps.

Though the cattle could not possibly have benefited by the new feed, the mere fact of the rain, and that revitalized air, gave them a new strength and playfulness. They bucked and skipped; they bellowed as they played; they fought strenuous battles over nothing and with a result that mattered as little. In short: they were alive.

One old red cow had played a losing battle with life for some months past. Her aged frame, her worn stumps of teeth, could not successfully fight the dry conditions. On two occasions she had collapsed at the troughs, her weak legs unable to support the load of her full belly when she turned after having her drink. On each occasion the pumper had taken her tail in his hands and helped her to her feet: "Come on, Granny, ol' girl. You can see it out. I been watchin' you a long time now. I'll save your life in spite of hell an' hallelujah."

That old cow battled on. Her weakness did not allow her to forage wide for fresh grass; but her wonderful vitality had carried her through. Now, with green grass springing all about her, with water at hand wherever she desired to drink, she played in her joy and skipped

as she must have done when a calf. She bucked towards a ghilgai of water, tried to catch herself in the air and turn as she had done in her younger days, and, blundering, ran along on her knees into the middle of the ghilgai. She rested a moment and then struggled to rise to her feet to feed as sedately as a cow of her age should.

She was trapped! That clinging mud was up to her shoulders; her feet were imprisoned in mud that manacled her; the more she struggled the tighter she was imbedded! That old cow who had weathered the dry time, had rubbed shoulders with death while she battled for a living, was doomed to a lingering death in the midst of plenty—a feast for flies, a gorge for mosquitoes, and, later, a supply for foul carrion. She was just one of the many minor tragedies of the bush.

The mobs of cattle split and went back to their accustomed feeding places once the season was assured. In a way, it was strange how individual cattle returned each year to certain areas, how they frequented certain waters, and how they moved in a definite and recognized circle as the season progressed. Brindle went with his mother to the whitewood ridges, an area favored by the brindle cow.

That splitting was only temporary. Within a week of the rains the sandflies came in their stinging millions. Those noiseless serpents of the air herded the cattle together; they drove them into mobs for their own protection, where swishing tails and dust from their trampling hooves might keep the sandflies slightly at bay. The cattle fed during the night; at the first streak of

dawn the clouds of sandflies came, to send all stock galloping to the shelter of communal mobs and to keep them there till the sun had sunk.

The flies also came—a myriad of flies, sticky, nauseous, filthy, poisonous. They ruled during the day. At night the mosquitoes took up where the flies left off. But those two, bad though they were, were mild compared with the sandflies—those insects whose bite was, for their size, more venomous than that of any other thing on wings.

It was while the cattle were herded in big mobs that the usual scourge came among them: cattle blight. This may have been carried from eye to eye by the constant flies; it may have been in the dust; it may have been in the air. In any case, practically every beast of the hundreds of thousands in those vast herds in the West had defective vision, either in one eye or in both.

Brindle, running at his mother's side among the mob with which she had mixed during the fortnight of the sandflies' short but stinging visit, had playmates of his own age with whom he expressed and indulged his joy of life. It was good to play with his mates, particularly during the half-hour preceding dark, after the flies and sandflies had gone and before the mosquitoes took up their nightly duties. It was grand to stand there, four feet wide-spread, head hung low, tail cocked like a hair-trigger, and to bound into instant action with a buck and a bellow when another calf made a pretended rush. It was good to play follow-my-leader, skipping over rocks and gullies, crushing soft

grass under the hooves, galloping till one was tired or till an anxious mother bade a cessation of a game that took her calf too far from her. It was good—good in every way—just to be alive and enjoy life.

He was playing with his mates one evening when suddenly, like a stab, his eye smarted. Within a few hours it was watering profusely; in the morning there was an iridescent scum over it which showed rainbow hues when the sun struck it, and the water poured down his cheek in an endless stream. Brindle recoiled from the pain; he held his head aside, and continually he turned from the searing pain which bit him.

It was so agonizing that he did not want to feed, was disinclined to drink. Almost as a matter of habit he went to his mother's flank and sucked boisterously, letting a milk-wet teat drag from his lips as he took another in his mouth. Bumping blindly, not knowing what he was doing, with the agony of his eye dulling all his other senses, he blindly and accidentally found the cure: a milk-wet teat dragged across his sore eye.

That milk, one of Nature's remedies, cured the eye absolutely. One drop was sufficient to effect a remedy. It may not have been instantaneous, but the ravages of the blight ceased from the moment that milk entered his eye. It did not restore any harm that had been done, and Brindle carried a slight scum on that eye for the rest of his life; but it checked the curse, stopped it, eased the pain. Further, having been once afflicted gave him a certain immunity to further attacks.

Next morning, with the stab of his eye eased, Brindle

looked in wonder and curiosity at an aged bullock with a scum on one eye, the other eye a bulbous mass bulging from its socket. The beast turned in ceaseless circles, shaking his head, trying to get away from the pain that cursed him as cattle blight attacked his remaining good eye. While Brindle watched, that protruding eye burst. Immediately, so it seemed, the anguish stopped; the bullock ceased revolving to get away from the pain. But swarms of hateful flies settled at once to feast on the jelly that coursed down the cheek.

With the sandflies gone, though the flies and mosquitoes remained, the mobs split up again and went to their selected areas. All cattle were doing well, and Brindle, with his sire to give him quality and his dam to give him milk, thrived wondrously.

The first branding muster of the year commenced about the end of March, when the ground was dry enough to let stock be whorled on it. Brindle and his mother, with another thousand to fifteen hundred head of mixed cattle, were mustered and taken to the river, which was still running half-rib deep, to be taken to the other side.

"We'll put th' camp on th' other side," said Tom. "We'll cross 'em and let 'em have a spell while we has dinner. We'll cut out after."

Most of the cattle splashed across the river playfully. Odd ones in their joy bailed up on the far bank and challenged others to dare to try the crossing. They played, bucked, and shook off the clinging drops of water when they gained the far bank. But the mob was

disorganized: mothers lost their calves in the press of forcing a crossing; mates were split and calling to each other; young micks and weaner heifers added to the disorganization by roaming freely and bellowing aimlessly.

As the last of the mob splashed across, there was left a cluster of calves who eyed the running water dubiously. With their mothers beside them to give them moral support, they would have taken it in their stride and thought nothing of it; without their mothers, and in the excitement that permeated the mob, doubtless their suspicious little minds regarded it as a trap set for them. They ignored the anxious calls of the older cattle on the other side; they started in fear and jumped in horror every time a stockman cracked a whip behind them in an effort to urge them into the stream.

Brindle's spirit broke! He raced away from the other calves, his head straight out, his tail horizontal, his black nose extended, his ears back, and his baby hooves throwing up cups of dust in the air behind him as he scampered. He may not have known where he was going. Perhaps he did not care. His wild instinct was to flee from the dread terror confronting him, to gallop straight, fast, endlessly.

As Brindle reached the flat claypan on the river bank, a new horror came to him: the thunder of galloping hooves in pursuit. He let out another link of speed, seeming to redouble his efforts, and the patter of his hooves on the claypan sounded like the rattle of a kettledrum.



*The thunder of the whip sounded and the lightning of its
lash hit.*

"I'll teach you, you brindle dog!" Tom's voice roared as he ranged up beside the flying calf. "This'll learn you th' beginnin' of your manners," he added as the thunder of the whip sounded and the lightning of its lash bit.

Brindle's thoughts may have been just one jumbled heap as those awesome sounds and hurts came to him. But he held straight on, dead to all reason, with the determination only to escape.

Tom steadied his horse a second so as to get into a position where he could handle the calf better. He swung his whip again—and in the next instant was floundering on the ground, scrambling along on his hands and knees, automatically trying to get beyond the reach of the horse's body; for he knew this body would follow—knew and pictured it without thinking. He realized in a flash that the horse had set his hoof on a bit of rotten ground, which had broken under him—and a fall with a horse to follow at racing speed is no light matter!

The horse came down with an earth-shaking crash just beside him, its tail brushing him as it fell; so close was it to him that one of its struggling hooves hit him on the shoulder.

Men helped him to his feet. He was shaken, lame, bleeding slightly from one corner of his mouth, with his shoulder twisted, and with a rash that had chafed the skin from his temple to his chin. His voice shook as he replied to one of his helpers:

"I'm right, Harry. See my horse is right, will you?"

Give us a hand up to th' camp. I'll lay down for a bit. You can put th' camp on after dinner, Joe. You knows what to do: take out all branders. I'll be right in th' mornin'."

"What about that brindle calf, Tom?"

"Oh, him! We'll let th' brindle dog go this time. I'm too crook to worry about him now. But there'll come a time, Brindle!" he added as he turned about and faced the direction in which the calf had gone. "There'll come a time, me boy! I'll teach you to work properly before I've finished with you. You won th' first round, Brindle, but we got a lot more to go yet."

6. *The Second Round*

"WHAT ABOUT THAT BRINDLE COW, TOM?" JOE ASKED before putting on the camp after lunch. "She's th' mother of that calf what got away. Will I take her out or let her go?"

"Take th' bitch out," Tom replied bitterly. "Put her in th' yard all night. She'll bellow all th' time for her calf. If he stays about here he'll come to th' yard durin' th' night an' we'll get him in th' mornin'."

Brindle did not stay. He was silly with fear and blind with pain from the whip when the horse fell. He did not know the chase had ended: he went on automatically, galloping unconsciously. He went, and he kept going, to leave the horror behind him, to get away from the mob, to seek safety in solitude. He galloped till his muscles tired, till his breath came in hot sobs, till in his distress he stumbled and tripped. He stopped and looked about him—his eyes red, his mouth slobbered with saliva, his flanks pumping, his tail twitching.

He started in sudden fear a couple of times to pull himself up abruptly and look about him again. Every whisper of rustling grass disturbed him—made him swing round and face in its direction; every harsh call of crow or shadow of kite soaring overhead set him on the alert.

He cooled off gradually and reason returned: he must find his mother. There was only one place to look for her: where he had last impressed himself upon her memory, where he had suckled in contentment, where she had stood over him when he lay to rest. This was at a small waterhole in Quail Creek just down from the whitewood ridges. He was now only about six miles away from where he had last actually seen his mother in the driven mob; but he had not impressed himself upon her there. And it was all of ten miles to the whitewood ridges. But Brindle never hesitated; he did not need to take his bearings or look for any landmarks. The Law said that, to find each other, parent and child must go back to the place where they had last been content together; and there was no need to consult a map when obeying the dictates of the Law. Brindle shook his head and struck a straight line for the hole in Quail Creek just down from the whitewood ridges.

He passed a few straggling cattle on the way. To each of them he ran, bellowing, and then, after a quick and cursory glance at them, he continued on his way. A mile or more from the waterhole he began to bellow in earnest, drawing in his flanks and puffing his cheeks as he expelled the last cubic inch of air from his lungs—long, plaintive roars of fervent intensity.

He reached the hole and walked about it, still bellowing. He even stepped knee-deep into the water, and disdainfully, almost scornfully, sipped a little of the stuff; it eased his thirst and softened his harsh throat. Then he went looking for his mother again, working

out half a mile or more from the hole, returning with an eager run in anticipation of finding her there on his return.

Brindle's voice gave way and cracked long before midnight. By then his bellow was a sickening wheeze that rose, on its top note, to the rusty creak of a dry hinge. But his flanks still heaved when he opened his mouth and tried to call; he listened as patiently for a reply, and, tired though he was, he refused to lie and wait though he stumbled and tripped over the rough ground. He called and called till the sucking of his breath as he took in wind was as loud as the hiss that came when he expelled it. He walked and called till the next day was born, till the sun was high, till his tired legs buckled at the knees and forced him to lie down.

Brindle lay in the grass, hidden when he was still, his brindle stripes blending with the shadows it cast. Had he been left by his mother, nothing could have induced the little fellow to move, to make a sound or betray his presence. But now, at every movement or strange sound, he bounded to his feet, ran in the direction whence that sound came, and called.

Back on the river the brindle cow had been cut out and yarded with the branders and their calves—about a hundred and fifty of them. At first, and in her timid excitement and fear, she did not notice that her calf was missing. Presently she was left in the yard with the other cattle, and the men had ridden away and left them. Now, casually, almost indifferently, she poked

through the mob in search of her baby. She called once or twice but did not bother to stop and listen to learn whether he replied. Then, following the example of the others about her, she lay and chewed the cud. She was apparently content. Like many another with a wild strain, once she was captured she was more amenable to reason than many quieter animals.

At dark, her swelling udders reminded her that the calf was missing, and she started to search in earnest. She worked through the mob carefully, calling as she worked; and then, when realization came to her, she went frantic. She measured every post and stub in that yard; she tested each wire; she estimated her ability to jump it. She raged through the yard, going from one side to the other, round the outer fences and through the cattle, and calling incessantly—deep and long-drawn bellows.

It was about midnight when her voice broke—when the gush of air when she inhaled was equal in intensity to the sob of the expulsion. Her excitement undoubtedly slacked her milk production; but her tightened udder was a constant reminder of the missing calf, and her natural mother love supplied the uneasiness to keep her in turmoil. By daylight she was a pitiful sight: flecked with filth, raked by horns of cows she had disturbed, her flanks drawn, her mouth slobbering long strings of saliva as she strained to a bellow that was little more than a belch.

As daylight approached, the men returned to the yard, and the noise of their coming and the clank of

the horses' gear drove the brindle cow to fresh paroxysms of terror as she made one last search before she crouched, like a beaten thing, hidden in a shadowed corner of the yard.

There was a scatter and a scamper of cattle as the men started to light the fire to heat the brands. When the flames flared up, inquisitive calves edged nervously nearer to this sun that was rising before them. They extended their little noses, sniffed and wondered. In the entrancement of having the sun beside them they ignored the men moving about. Truly those little calves would swear for the rest of their lives that they had stood beside the sun while it rose one morning. The fascination of the fire held them, and even the dread man-smell as a hand was rubbed over their nostrils failed to frighten them. They were drawn as by a magnet from all corners of the yard, the smallest and youngest in the lead, and the wise old cows showed no perturbation over the welfare of their young.

Morning came with a rush, and the greater glory of the sun drowned the puny insignificance of the fire. The calves knew then they had been misled, perhaps beguiled by another of man's many base tricks. They scampered back to their mothers and, as a matter of course, went to their flanks.

It was halfway to noon when the branding was finished.

"You an' Woppida th' boy can steady them cattle on th' river for a hour or so," Joe called to Harry, assuming his position as temporary head stockman quite

naturally. "If that brindle bitch wants to clear out, let 'er go. She'll on'y upset th' mob if you try to hold her."

Joe was right: the brindle cow was intent only on getting back to her calf. She left the mob, took the river in a wave of water and a splash of foam, and—though the last place she had actually seen her calf was on that river bank—she knew where she had to go to find him. For the same law governed her as had dictated to her calf: she had to go to Quail Creek, just down from the whitewood ridges.

It was mid-afternoon when the calf heard her approach—about thirty hours after they had parted on the bank of the river. The cow's udders were distended, with teats ready to squirt milk at the least bump or pressure. The calf was hollow, with sunken eyes, and, though he bore himself bravely, his hooves were dragging in the dust as he ran.

Without delay he went to his mother, and took her flank with a rush and a jar. Hanging to her teat he slobbered and bumped, and she caressed him with rasping slabs of her tongue. She did not move away when the drink was half completed, as she usually did: instead, she stood still, one hind leg back to expose her udders further, and let the little fellow drink till his distended belly would hold no more, till he grunted his contentment, till saliva frothed at his lips. Then, after letting go lingeringly, he turned round a couple of times and lay and slept with his mother standing over him.

Next day the cattle who were accustomed to running

on Quail Creek began to drift back there. The calves were sore and strained from the ropes and brands—the males doubly sore after the operation—and they did not want to play their usual games. Brindle, always domineering, asserted himself still further over his little clique, bossing them about in a way that they were too sick to resist. He had an advantage now: he was well and strong, and thus he gained the leadership of his little band.

Life continued. Early in April the winds gained volume, their edges tinged with ice, and the smaller waterholes dried.

The flies had died off, the former armies being reduced to a mere handful of scouts. The mosquitoes had ended their brief lives. Only the last and hardiest of the swarms of grasshoppers shed rays of burnished light from their wings as they sailed through the air. And with the drying of the smaller holes the remnants of the waterhens packed up and went. They had come overnight with the breaking of the rains—hundreds of thousands of them, with raucous cries, with a slicing of wind as they flew, and in the morning they had possession of the land. Just as mysteriously, seen by none as they went, they had disappeared. The softer green grasses had died; the outside waters were gone; food, once so abundant, had disappeared. This was no country now for a bird that lived on the green of the land.

When the cattle shifted in from the drying water in Quail Creek and went to the river, the brindle cow and her calf were with them. She went somewhat un-

willingly, and her calf had to be coaxed to follow her. A wild thing, she hated places where cattle congregated in numbers, where traffic passed her, where men on horses were to be seen regularly. He inherited his mother's wildness; in addition he had experienced a meeting with man, had suffered from it, had bested that man-thing and gained confidence in his ability to do so.

The cattle that watered at the river holes went in during the day to drink. Brindle, a brumby by instinct, hated that method. He disliked the idea of going near the channels at all, of loitering there, of being at the mercy of the predatory beasts that once used to lurk at those main watering places. He preferred to be that wilder thing: a night drinker.

On the second day at the river, when his mother essayed to lead him in, Brindle stood in front of her, his rump hard against her chest, and refused to move. She pushed him aside. He ran to the other side and repeated the performance. He stood square in front of her, entangling her legs as she walked. For half an hour or more he fought stubbornly, and then the cow gave way. She stood over him while he lay in the grass and chewed the cud; and, after the sun had set, ignoring the strings of cattle that fed out to grass, she drifted in noiselessly, with never a clink of a pebble as she walked, and, in the darkness, it seemed that the shadow of a floating cloud moved over the ground as the brindle cow went to water.

When she drank she did not lie under the trees on the river bank, chew the cud, and go back for a final

sip. She knew that age-old death lurked in the shadow of those trees at the water. She had her drink—quick and full, even though nervous—and she slid up the bank and out from the river with the same ease with which a man would shed a loose coat. And the calf beside her, young and inexperienced, was as silent as his mother, as quick to sink to motionless immobility and merge himself into a shadow. Being night drinkers they ran on the outside fringe of the cattle, where the grass was fresh and untouched and where both of them thrived.

A couple of times Brindle saw a horseman in the distance. So long as the man was in sight, the calf had watched motionless, poised for flight if the horse should turn in his direction; and as soon as they had disappeared he led his mother in a mile-long run to get away from the danger.

Then, in July, the bullock muster began. Men, a mile or more apart, swept the country in eight-mile radii, and gathered in the mob with which Brindle and his mother were feeding. They put that mob of fifteen hundred or more on camp and started to cut out the fat bullocks.

Brindle was nervous. He was more than nervous: he was upset, fearful, and only the fact that his mother was with him restrained him from racing away from the hated man-things that controlled the cattle. He hugged his mother's flanks, sticking tight to her, and jumping with cringing flesh every time a whip cracked. Perhaps in his baby mind he wondered why his mother

submitted to being handled in the mob. He, Brindle, knew he could race away from man any time he wished. He had done it before; he could do it again. He was more than willing to prove it. But the Law definitely ruled that a calf must stay with its mother, and Brindle accepted the ruling. He stayed.

"I see that brindle calf's in the mob, Tom," Leonard, the manager, said to his head stockman. "I was wrong: that fellow ain't rubbish. He's the makings of a good bullock."

"Hulloa, Brindle," Tom hailed the calf. "You an' me got to have a meetin' or two yet before we're finished. I'm feelin' pretty fit after me fall; you look jake. We're both doin' well!"

"What about cutting him now?" Leonard asked. "You've got ropes in the camp. Anyway, we don't want ropes for a mick like that."

"I'd sooner not, Mr. Leonard," Tom replied. "I got a bit of sent-i-ment in me make-up. If I was to make a special cer-e-mo-ny of cuttin' that bloke now, I'd feel I was doin' him a honor what ain't due to him. If I was to make a branding just for him alone, I'd be after givin' him notions above his station in life. I'll get him at th' general brandin' muster an' show him who's th' better man of th' pair of us."

7. *The Third Round*

BRINDLE LEFT THE CAMP WITH MIXED FEELINGS. No man had tried to handle him in any way while the camp was in progress. Perhaps, in his cocksure bumptiousness, he attributed this to the fact that they could not do anything with him. Still, when the cattle had been let go, and when Brindle led his mother in a run to escape, a man on horseback had unceremoniously checked them, driven them back to the cattle, and held them and steadied them for an hour or more before freeing them.

All this made an impression on the minds of other cattle and increased their tractability. To a slight extent it may have penetrated the egregious conceit that armored Brindle's pride, for he knew now that he could be turned—and this is the cornerstone on which the education of stock is built.

And now Brindle and his mother, together with the cattle which usually ran there, returned to their accustomed area out from the river, on one of the smaller holes, to move in to the Corella when the smaller holes dried.

He was growing rapidly, more dominant than ever, and, as his dependence upon his mother lessened, he roamed farther afield and mixed more with other cattle. But, whether his mother was with him or not, he re-

tained his night-drinking habit—that mark of the wild thing.

With the change of season the birds had congregated in great flocks, their first clutches of the year being reared, educated and weaned to fend for themselves. Particularly noticeable were the thousands of corellas. They flung long streamers of white across the sky as the sun was sinking; they turned to pink as the magic of the sun caught them at a new angle; they festooned the trees with white lace of living links as they roosted at night. And when overburdened branches, made brittle by the snapping cold, broke during the night and dropped their living loads, then what a commotion as wings flapped and jostled, as hoarse voices rose in protest, as others up and down the river added to the medley!

The budgerigars gathered in swarms, hurrying always, flying blankets of green and scarlet as they reflected the sun. Over on the Mimosa Holes, in Gidyea Creek, where the last camp of the bullock muster was beside the water, crows and kite hawks rested in the trees. This was common. A man—any man—had only to pitch a tent, unharness a horse from a dray, make some show of staying a few hours, and crows and kites would gather. No settlement, however small, could be made in that country without its attendant scavengers, the kites and the crows. No refuse could be thrown on the ground without attracting their attention; no animal could die without their knowing it and awaiting the death.

The draft of fats were feeding on the flat, tailed by a couple of men, and over them also the kites swung on motionless wings: a blundering grasshopper might rise from beneath those trampling hooves and offer a meal to their base appetites. Leonard, Tom Mitchell, and a couple of men lounged about the dray and lay on the banks of the hole while waiting the sun's pleasure to sink and declare the day finished.

One of the men, Harry, addressing no one in particular, made a remark: "I see them flock pigeons is comin' back."

"I've seen a few also," Leonard agreed. "But they're nothing compared with what they used to be."

Old Jim gave an affirmative grunt and added: "I've seen 'em on th' Winton plains that thick they'd darken th' sky of an evenin'. I seen 'em, after th' first telegraft wires was put up, a man could follow them wires by th' dead birds on th' ground."

"Stretchin' it a bit, ain't you, Jim?" Harry asked.

"Stretchin' nothin'," old Jim snapped. "You young fellers ain't weaned yet. You seen nothin'. You know what them flock pigeons used to be like, Boss?" Jim appealed to Leonard.

"I've never seen them in those numbers, Jim. I'm not as old as you. But I do definitely believe it's true."

"Where they gone now?" Harry demanded. "If we see a mob of three or five or ten thousan' now, we reckon it's worth writin' home about. Where they gone? They can't be wiped out that sudden."

"What's the speediest means of extermination of a species?" Leonard asked.

"Eh!"

"To attack it in its breeding areas," Leonard continued.

"Or kill th' does an' leave th' bucks alive," Tom supplemented.

"You've been reading Rodier, Tom, and I agree with it," said Leonard. "To continue with these flock pigeons: there's no doubt they were once here in countless millions. They used to breed on this their southern migration. While you're thinking that out, Harry, I'll just get busy with a paper and pencil on a few figures.

"There's about three million, two hundred thousand square yards to a square mile. That's rough, but it's near enough. Call it a round three millions so as to remember it easily. Now, if you've got that figure fixed, I'll go on with the idea. I saw this: I know my facts.

"The last time I saw the pigeons in numbers was in nineteen-seven—which was before you were born, Harry. I was with the sheep then, on Warbreccan Station on the Thompson River. The boss of the camp, the overseer, decided to take fourteen thousand wethers across the Prairie Block, to Coriki Tank. That was virgin country then, and about twelve miles across. We were in pigeons the whole way across.

"It seemed to me, though I may have been wrong, that there was a nest with two eggs under every tussock of Mitchell grass. There'd be more than one tussock to

a square yard. You're not forgetting that three million, are you?

"When we got those sheep to Coriki the wethers, as a mob, were splashed yellow up their legs with the yolks of broken eggs. They cut a track half a mile wide right across the Prairie. Just work out, rough and lively, how many pigeons were killed by those wethers! I'd make it, in round figures, about twenty million. We could divide it by two, or by four, or by ten, and still it would be a hell of a smash to a breeding colony.

"That was just one instance. As they always nested on the open downs country, you can imagine what a feeding mob of sheep would do to them, what a mob of cattle would do. In my opinion, and I think I'm right, the flock pigeon was doomed when this country was put under stock."

"Say, Mr. Leonard," Harry interrupted excitedly, looking upward, "what d'you make of *that*?"

"Speaking of the devil, Harry," Leonard replied as he, too, looked up. "We were discussing flock pigeons, and here they come! The mob, by my calculation, is over a hundred yards long by more than fifty wide. That's more than an acre. They're packed more than two to a square yard, in several layers. Work out your own estimate of this small mob. Here they come!"

A khaki cloud came shooting in from the east, firing straight at the setting sun, shedding the metallic gleam of burnished copper as the horizontal rays glinted from their feathers. They came hissing, the whistle of wings drowning the roar of the eternal wind. They peeled

miles casually and laid them unconcernedly over their shoulders as they raced the length of the hole.

Suddenly, as one bird, they breasted up to the wind and lowered a stratum; then, wafted by fear of the unknown, they rose again and raced in a body up and down the length of the hole before lowering again.

Then, suddenly, astonishingly, they lowered onto the face of the water, covering the hole with a khaki blanket! For now their wings were cupped as they sprawled on the water, and it must have been the imprisoned air that floated their half-submerged bodies.

"Blimey!" Harry gasped—and so stunning was the silence after that mighty rush of wind that his muffled gulp seemed to crack the shocked air.

The birds never paused. They plunged their bills into the water, drank in great gulps, as a horse does, and surely none had taken more than three long swallows before all the wings hit the water at once with a smack that sounded like a whip; and, with dripping water pitting the hole like rain, the birds rose as one and banked steeply as, with a whistling of torn wind, their wings took hold.

"Blimey!" Harry gasped again. His eyes were on one straggling bird that had been left behind, and that was now rocking as his wings bit the air in fifty-yard lengths, laying them end on end and climbing to rejoin his mob.

"What good are mere words in the face of a wonder like that?" Leonard asked himself, and aloud he added:



The birds rose as one and banked steeply.

"We'd better go and put those bullocks on camp for the night. We deliver them tomorrow."

After the delivery of fats, routine work followed: men attended neighboring musters, cattle were shifted as dictated by the balance of grass and water, and the camp came together again late in September to commence the final branding muster of the year.

Down the river, on Bendee Hole, the cattle were sparse. Before going to his swag that night Tom gave the cook an outline of the next day's work:

"We'll be shiftin' a mob up th' river tomorrow, Cookoo. We won't be back till about three o'clock. We'll take our dinner with us. You'll let them dogs go after we're gone, will you?"

The dogs were left tied to their chains in the camp when the men rode away next morning. The cook let them go about midway through the morning. They nosed about the camp, picked up scraps, lazily snapped at flies, yawned and slept.

At about two o'clock Stepper, wise old dog that he was, lifted his head and sniffed the air. He was casual, though his blue-haired body tensed slightly, and he trotted down to the waterhole in the river and had a drink and a swim. His mate Biddy, the mother of many pups, looked meaningly at the younger ones as she also went to the water. They followed, as casually as their elders.

In all there were half a dozen dogs: the two older ones, two in their second year, and the remaining pair of first-year pups. All were blue-black brindles, hardy

and game, fairly fast, trained to bite hard; and, though they differed slightly, they would all go between forty- and sixty-pound weight. They were members of Australia's own breed of cattle dogs—the Queensland heelers.

Stepper led the way down the course of the river to where the rumbling of hooves and the distant cracking of a whip told him cattle were being driven—cattle that were lazy, a bit tired, jaded by the whip-cracks. The laggard tail of this mob required some new stimulus—biting teeth and snake-striking bodies—to spring them to attention. Irregularly, unconcernedly, and taking their own time, the other dogs followed Stepper's course.

The men had picked up about twelve hundred cattle which Tom had decided could with advantage be shifted to Bendee. One musterer, swinging wide out from the river, had gathered in the small mob on whose outskirts Brindle and his mother ran.

"Hulloa, Brindle," Tom greeted the calf as he joined the main mob. "You're growin' a big feller now, ain't you? It looks like you don't worry none about your mother now. She's dry. Oh, well, I suppose you're gettin' to be a young feller more interested in girls than anythin' else. I'll fix them troubles for you, tomorrow, Brindle. Then you'll grow into a nice big bullock with nothin' to worry you."

Brindle hated being in the mob; he loathed the idea of being controlled; he jumped and ran every time a man rode near him when he left the body of the mob

to enjoy the freer action of the wings or tail. He was hot with his own fear and excitement; the farther he went the more impatient he became; he went with the mob for the company of the mob, though his desire was to break away and race back to the country from which he had been mustered.

The dogs joined the men at the cattle. A distinct tremor went through the mob as they tightened up at the sight of the dogs and as the laggards at the tail, knowing those signs, gained new life and the safety of the mob in one action. Those cattle knew. Bullocks that had been inclined to break away, cows that were difficult to keep straight, lazy ones that loafed—as soon as the dogs came they mended their ways immediately and tried to conform to the dictates of the men who drove them. They knew!

Brindle did not know. As the cattle tightened, he was jostled in the crush. He hated that. He broke from the mob to get more freedom of action. As soon as he came clear, one of the men rode up beside him and brought his whip into play—struck with full force, drawing as it hit, making it bite with a rasping action that floated a ribbon of hair in the air and brought slow clots of blood. “Get back to th’ mob, y’ sulky dog!”

This was too much for Brindle’s outraged spirit: he turned on a pin’s head and in a flick of time he lowered his head and charged blindly, blunderingly, anywhere to get clear of the hated men, the stifling mob, the dust and crush.

Tom gave a short, sharp whistle which the dogs

knew. They sprang to it. This was their life, their work, their recreation, their breeding—all there was of what constitutes a dog apart from food. They had come to join the cattle for just such a purpose as that which Brindle offered, and they needed no second bidding.

As the bull calf streaked away from the mob, thundering, his head down, his tail up, with strings of saliva floating in the air behind him, Tom laughed grimly to himself.

“You ain’t goin’ for to break no good horse’s neck *this* time, me boy. You’re givin’ them dogs all th’ odds against yourself, an’ they don’t want no odds: they can beat you on th’ level. They’re fresh, with the gas taken from ’em, without bein’ tired an’ with no dust in their throats. You got all them things, Brindle. You ain’t got a chance, me boy.”

Brindle galloped madly for the first few yards of his flight. From previous experience he expected a ridden horse to range up beside him. He also knew, from that previous experience, that he could get away from man and beat him. He held himself slightly in reserve, with muscles drawn in readiness for an extreme effort. Then, as no man followed him, he relaxed a little and, though as determined in his flight, he raced more easily.

When steely claws suddenly snapped at his hind heels he must have thought that some earth-dwelling devil had gripped him. He bounded, bellowed, and now kept nothing in reserve, stretching his muscles to the limit as he strove to get away. He raced another hun-

dred or more yards, bellowing and kicking vainly. Then he propped, wheeled, and bailed up to fight the horror that clung to him and that already was making him flaccid with the blanketing fear of the unknown and unattackable. He spun on his hind legs with a spurt of dust, a bellow of belligerency. Filth splashed his ribs from shoulder to thigh, and weblike streamers of saliva flecked his whole body. He was pumping for wind, spent, but he was game. He turned to fight for his life.

As he propped and wheeled, Bidy slid past him like a blue shadow. Brindle's first snort was cut short as a devil with a steel trap closed its jaws on his hind heel. He kicked wildly, blindly, furiously; that kicking leg was just a blur of action as it defied the laws of speed. It was a miracle of instantaneous action. But the miracle was countered by a greater one, for, as Bidy bit, she sank to the ground even as her teeth gripped. One action was the culmination of the other, beautiful in its grace and ease. Brindle's hoof, death-laden and spite-driven, passed over Bidy's body, ruffling the hair as it passed but doing no more harm than the passing gust of wind it created.

But before Brindle's hoof was drawn back into position, another trap closed on the other leg; when that flying hoof returned and hit the ground it was seized; it must have seemed to him that a thousand devils, each with a score of fiendish devices, were at work on him.

Then one of the pups barked in his joyous excitement. Tom's whip cracked its admonition, and his voice rang out sternly. Silence was a virtue in cattle dogs, for

silence plus their victims' fear of the unknown made them more formidable.

The pup's bark brought a slight access of courage to Brindle: now he knew what it was that attacked him, and he charged the pup.

Stepper, king of dogs, header and heeler combined, had been waiting for some such move as this. He was in position, ready and waiting. As Brindle lowered his head and swept past the crouching dog, Stepper sprang. His teeth closed on the bull's nose—closed, gripped, and held on to what was perhaps the tenderest part of the bull's body. As his teeth gripped, he bundled his body into a heap, coiled in on himself as it were, and, with the same action, swung between the bull's front legs which were striking blindly.

Brindle stumbled, ran along on his knees, tried to buck from the ground to the air, and, unbalanced, crashed to the ground with a thud and a belch of wind that seemed to shake the leaves of trees about him. He had enough. He was cowed by the horror of the unknown, pinned to the ground by his most vulnerable point, sore, winded, and beaten. He lay there and sobbed his distress.

Tom laughed as he called the dogs off the bull. He rode up to the animal lying there and flayed it with the full force of his whip: "Get back to th' mob, me smart boy. I tol' you I'd teach you. How do you like your lesson?"

Brindle scrambled to his feet, shook himself, and looked about him in one action; saw the comforting

body of the cattle a couple of hundred yards distant; never hesitated as he raced to the protection which the mob afforded him. And as he raced, speeding him to further haste, driving home the lesson they had taught, the blue devils reveled in the fun as they accompanied him back to the mob and raised hair at every snap of their jaws on his heels!

Brindle regained the mob, taking it as a small tidal wave might break itself on a rocky shore. He knocked one calf over as he hit it with his chest; he sprawled as he cannoned off a bigger body than his own; he hustled and pushed, jumped and scrambled till he fought his way to the center of the mob as far as he could get from the grinning blue devils who had—as Tom laughingly taunted—“given you th’ first lesson in your eddication, me boy.”

Brindle forced his way through the mob as it was driven towards the river crossing. Older cattle raked him with their horns to punish him for his presumption in jostling them; younger ones were pushed aside without ceremony. He had worked up to the lead when his heart failed him and the horror of being made him go back. He wove his way out to the wing, but men there made him crouch away lest they see him and inflict further punishment. But he could not go back to the tail of the driven cattle—the dogs were there, and the crack of whips told him that there were men there, too.

The mob came to the billabongs and crossed the first channels. That disorganized them: they ran down the

banks and loitered in the bed of the channel; some ran, while others puffed and labored as they climbed the opposite bank. The cattle scattered from a compact mob to one that was spread over an area, working in strings and ribbons, a unity but a slack one. Brindle worked his way into the heart of several units of that mob; he strove to hide himself, to keep away from men, to preserve the protection that the mob afforded. They had crossed a dozen or more billabongs, and left the dry bed of the main channel behind; and, in a maze of watercourses, a scrub of lignum and canegrass, Brindle suddenly found himself alone.

Brindle never thought: he acted. And now he darted for the cover of a clump of lignum at the junction of two channels. He had barely gained it when a stockman rode by. Brindle cowered; the only parts of him that moved were his ribs, which thumped to his pounding heart, and his eyes which rolled wildly in desperate search of a mob of cattle in which he would hide himself. He stayed only long enough to let the man pass, when he dived from the lignum to a thicker patch of canegrass.

Here he was alone, though he had been sure he would find cattle. He darted from that cover down the bed of the channel, ran up another, stood hidden in some overgrown lignum as the deafening thunder of a whip broke almost beside him. In a panic, he raced madly in short spurts. But no cattle were in the channels along which he ran or in the vegetation in which he hid. Finally, in desperation, he ran blindly down

the course of the channel in which he happened to be, confident that he would in time run into some of the cattle which were so close, which he could smell and hear.

The mob drew out on the other side of the river channel, stringing in clusters and links of a chain. They were put on camp for the wanderers to be cut out from them, while the others would be let go to run on this fresh area.

"Where's that brindle calf, Tom?" one of the men asked the head stockman when the camp had been steadied.

"Well, I'll be dazzled!" Tom exploded. "Strike me dead if the blasted mongrel ain't beat me again! But I'll get you, Brindle, me boy. I'll get you and teach you if it takes me all your life to do it! We'll meet again, Brindle."

8. *The Brumby Mob*

WHEN THE LAST OF THE DRIVEN CATTLE DREW OUT from the billabongs and on to the plains, Brindle was a mile or more down the river, hidden in the channels, going with a fixity of purpose suggesting that he had decided on his destination. Really, he did not know where he was going. If he had any thoughts at all, his whole spirit surged with the sublime knowledge that he had met man again and had beaten him, that he was above the Law and invincible. He was only a young fellow, freshly weaned, and this faith in his own power made him dangerous—dangerous alike to himself and to others with whom he came in contact.

So long as he was within sound of the mob and the whips, he jumped and galloped madly every time the crack came to him; when he had left those sounds behind he steadied down to a powerful trot, his shoulders working with effortless ease and the rhythmic action of well-oiled pistons.

He came upon the pads of other cattle, but ignored them. He hit the shallow top of Hobble Hole, and splashed through that with the same steady gait, and, though he was thirsty, he did not deign to wet his muzzle. He went on, blind to everything. When the sun was dipping, he came out from the channels, stood

on the bank, and looked about him. He paid no attention to the corellas streaming in to roost in the coolibahs on the river; he never noticed how the wind picked up the strings of saliva from his jaws and floated them in gossamer webs through the air; he heard but ignored the cattle lowing as they fed out from water. His eyes were red; his flanks pumping; his tail never still as it switched angrily from side to side, further spreading the filth with which he was bespattered. He moved restlessly a couple of times, and then, with the startling suddenness of instant action, he broke into his monotonous trot again.

This time he left the course of the river and headed towards the setting sun. He went resolutely, as if called by a message or guided by a light. A mob of bush cattle saw him coming and lifted their heads and gathered together to view this stranger. Brindle may not have seen them: he gave no acknowledgment, did not deviate in his direction or slacken his speed, and he went straight through the cattle, pushing those aside which stood in his path.

Some of the younger and more playful of the mob essayed to follow that silent stranger, to buck after him, to bellow and run round him. One sexless steer raced on ahead of him, spun sharply, lowered his head, raked up the dust, and bellowed his challenge as Brindle approached him.

Brindle ignored the challenge. Under ordinary conditions his awakening sex would have urged him to put that steer in his place, to indulge in a pass or two just

for practice in battle, even to pit himself in a full fight. But now he went straight ahead, and the young steer had to dodge to avoid the baby avalanche. Feeling that the etiquette of his class had been flouted, the steer raced after the young bull, bucking as he went, and—such was his confidence in his own prowess—he raked Brindle with his horns and sent a ribbon of hair floating from his buttocks. Brindle did not acknowledge the indignity. He trotted ahead, purposeful, determined, unaware that the steer had returned to his mob with vainglorious bellowings over his cheap victory.

It was dark before he stopped—and stopped as suddenly as if he had run into a brick wall. He swung about him, his head low for instant action, and he glared back over the track. He braced himself, held his head high, motionless but for his switching tail. He held his pose for a minute or more, swung again, walked about him, smelt the ground, turned suddenly at some imagined threat from his rear. Now, brief though that relaxation had been, he closed his mouth and once more breathed normally through his nostrils.

Brindle was himself again—indeed more than himself: he was a masterful young bull. He could not analyze his feelings; but sullen anger probably predominated. He hated everything, he was hot with temper, fevered with victory; and, after the manner of his kind, he would celebrate and proclaim his triumph. He dropped to his knees, with his brisket rubbing the ground, and raked one horn in the dust. Then turned his head and raked the other. He stood erect and pawed

heavily, sending streams of dirt and small pebbles over his shoulders—dirt that clung to his wet sides and formed mud filthier than what was already there. He went to a small mimosa tree that grew on the bank of a broken gully, raked it with his stubs of horns, walked over it, flattened it, returned, and knelt to work it into the ground. Thus he left his track—the track showing that a bull had passed that way who challenged the world, and dared it to accept that challenge.

Brindle turned and continued in the direction in which he had been going. Again he walked steadily, determinedly, with a fixed point apparently in prospect. It was well on towards midnight when he reached the edge of the desert country, about fifteen miles out from the river. He had never been here before; this land of spinifex and bloodwoods was strange to him. Even so, he became as instantly a part of it as does the needle that attaches itself to a magnet. He did not need to look about him to find his bearings: he knew. As certainly as if he were keeping a prearranged date at an appointed place, he walked through the timber and joined the brumby mob of cattle that ran in that area.

This was only a small mob of nervous station cattle who had responded to the call of the wild and were playing at being brumbies: some twenty cows, a collection of calves of various ages, and one massive red bull. They were only imitation brumbies, and the management and stockmen paid no attention to them beyond giving the bull a name: Old Rowdy. The fact that most of the calves were branded indicated that they could

be handled when wanted. Now they all advanced to meet the newcomer.

Brindle was a sorry sight—disheveled, hollow drawn. When mustered that afternoon he may have weighed around eight hundred pounds live weight; but eighty pounds had been burned up in energy since then. His eyes blazed red even in the half-light of night, and, though something had been lost, something else had taken its place. Apparently the sudden upset in his life, the excitement and the heat, had pressed a trigger that loosed the knowledge of sex. Not yet fully known, of course; but the beginnings were there. He was a bull, and he knew it!

A presumptuous youngster of his own sex and about his own age advanced from the mob to demand from Brindle the respect due from strangers. He dropped to one knee, rubbed his brisket along the ground, raked one short horn—and this was as far as he got with his challenge.

Brindle was too hot already to need any working up to battle; he was distraught by strange surroundings; he had an instinctive knowledge of the Law. While that mickey was going through the preliminaries, Brindle had already stripped for action: he charged, caught the other off balance, bundled him over and, as he rose, rooted with his stumpy horns, which bruised even if they did not tear.

Old Rowdy now advanced ponderously to have a look at Brindle. The young fellow was wise enough to know sense, even though the heat ran through his

body: he suffered Old Rowdy to smell him over and push him about. Also, he knew enough to dodge and keep out of the way when the bull made a playful sweep at him with his horns.

That was enough for the mob: Old Rowdy had accepted him; they would take him. Brindle was a member of the brumby mob!

Almost immediately he had his first hard lesson. That mob were trained to go to water every second night, except in the hottest period of summer—and it was doubtful if even then they broke the rule more than once a year. They had drunk at about the same time as that at which Brindle had had his last drink: the night before. But Brindle had not trained himself to any such forty-eight-hour abstinence, and ordinarily he would be having his daily drink now—at this current midnight. If he was to be a member of that mob, however, he must go another twenty-four hours before having his drink.

And Brindle suffered during that period. A dozen times he started to walk in to water; as many times the strength of the Law drew him back to the mob. They had been living their usual lives; Brindle had been upset by his greatest upheaval to date: he was hot and fevered, and the excitement in his blood had not died down. He suffered. But he stayed with the mob.

Again Brindle did not learn: he knew. That night, going to water, racked with thirst though he was, he kept his place in the mob. Though he had never before needed stealth, he was as silent as a shadow; not one

stone clicked or twig snapped when he put his hooves down. He took his place in the line of stringing cattle working in to water, and his body merged with its surroundings as completely as any in that mob. He knew. Perhaps he gloried in the knowledge. His father may have been a stall-fed champion who was led before cheering crowds on grand parades; but his mother was a wild thing who knew how to battle for her life. In men's opinion, the conformation Brindle inherited from his sire may have been the main thing; but to a brumby the cunning and bravery of his wild mother was of greater importance.

The mob came to water and drank. They waded out half-rib deep and gorged till their bellies swelled to hideous sizes, till they gasped and belched as they waddled up the bank of the hole—till each beast knew it had a reserve to last it over the next drinkless period of forty-eight hours. But Brindle had not had any previous training covering that length of time, and he seemed more than uncomfortable—he seemed awkward—as he climbed the bank, one distended paunch unevenly balanced and riding higher than the other as he waddled.

The mob worked back to their haunts, feeding as they went. Their object was to reach the shelter of the timbered country on the edge of the desert at about sunrise, though under normal conditions any time before noon would do. On this night they were working under normal conditions. They had not been disturbed for

months; they were tranquil and, being more or less sure of themselves, comparatively at ease.

During that trip back to the desert it became apparent why that mob were not like other herds of scrub cattle, with a number of bulls and cleanskins. A couple of young micks of about Brindle's age were attracted by an amorous cow who already had a retinue of admirers, and they deserted the mob and joined her retinue. Brindle, however, did little more than pause and lift his head. He was sore, weary, jaded—too depressed physically to worry about flirtatious females—and the Law which was strong in him told him definitely that he had to be back to the shelter of the timbered country by daylight.

And there was further evidence the mob were only a band of amateurs: one aged cow, having decided between two bites of a tussock of grass that she was sick of the wild life and preferred the modern conveniences of a progressive age, stayed with a lot of station cattle which had not even invited her to join their ranks. A red heifer—by mutual consent, it seemed—exchanged places with another of her own age who would go on with the brumbies while the red heifer stayed with the station cattle.

The mob were within sight of the desert timber by daylight; by noon they had drifted into it, been absorbed by it, and, with sundry grunts and turnings, had sunk to recumbent ease, chewing the cud, content to pass the time to sundown when they would again go out on the plains to feed.

Brindle accepted the life automatically. For a day or two he was uneasy, till his tired muscles and strained sinews recovered; during this time he may have lost about another thirty pounds of weight. Then the complete comfort of the life took possession of him and he recovered. And with that recovery his awakened sex seized him as a tidal wave and enveloped him.

One day, about a week or more after his acceptance into the mob, he was paying court to an old cow. Though she did not appreciate his attentions she did not actively resent them: she merely moved away a few steps. Brindle followed and became more demonstrative in his advances.

Then, in one blurred second of racing speed Brindle was conscious of the thunder of racing hooves, of horns lifting beneath his belly, and of a surprised gulping bellow that followed him as he was tossed in an arc and came to earth with a thud.

Old Rowdy would not let advances be made to his cows! He stood over the struggling calf as Brindle tried to rise; lifted him again with his horns and sent him spinning a dozen feet distant; he charged like a shot from a gun as Brindle, half-scrambling, half-running, dodged to safety.

Brindle did not have to "learn" this lesson: it was dormant in him, needing only to be brought to the surface and recognized. Now he knew his place and what course he had to follow: If there were no amorous cows in the mob, then he was permitted to mingle with that mob, to be one of them, to do as they did. If amor-

ous cows were present, then Brindle had to follow behind at a respectful distance, keep on the outskirts. From afar, he could bellow and send messages; but he could not mingle. He was one of the mob: he had to conform with the Law.

9. *Routine*

SUMMER CAME WITH A SNAP. OLD ROWDY'S MOB ALTERED their usual procedure: every second day, before going to water, they moved in towards one of the spurs of timber that stretched out into the plains. That this was only a little more than ten miles from the water in the river was a useful consideration when bodies were baked by heat, dried by thirst, racked with agony. That mob of brumby cattle did it as if governed by one brain, without any indication of leadership, and as casually as if it were the proper thing to do.

With the coming of summer the red blood ran hot in the bulls' veins and their desires were strong. Brindle, in the first flush of the flow of sex, was often sorely tempted on his trips to water when passing through mobs of station cattle. He would lag behind the mob as they fed back to the timbered country on the edge of the desert; would loiter and join the strings of other micks kept at a distance by stronger bulls. But these were only temporary lapses on his part: he would be back on the fringe of the timber as the sun was rising.

One baking hot night, when the air itself seemed spouted through a flue from Hades, the brumby mob lay at the edge of the timber. Their mouths were agape as they tongued and gasped, too inert to chew the cud,

too uncomfortable to lie at ease. Suddenly, and with no warning, all the beasts rose to their feet, stretched themselves with elaborate care, turned, and formed the line that always marched to water. They moved off as if at a spoken command, though not a sound had been uttered.

They were late in starting that night, and the sun was well up while they were as yet some distance from the desert. This did not bother them: they had not been molested for months. They moved along steadily, more or less contentedly—and Brindle stayed behind.

Desire had overcome prudence in that young bull. There had already been what might be termed occasional clandestine meetings—mere oddments that had hardly been enough to whet his swelling appetite, let alone satisfy it. Now he joined a string of young micks following a mob of cows; young bulls who were perhaps acting as the young males of all animals behave at like ages under like conditions.

The mob of cows were making towards the river for their daily drink. Brindle followed, discretion lost, the Law forgotten. He was about halfway to the river, hot in his eagerness to force his way past older bulls and gain the center of the mob, when suddenly he spied a ridden horse in the distance!

Brindle never hesitated: he wheeled and, in one action, was a galloping streak throwing dirt behind it. He doubled in on himself and let out another link of speed as the sound of a whip and the voice of a man came to him.

"Go on, Brindle!" Tom laughed. "I'm not goin' for to knock a good horse about, wheelin' you on this soft ground. I'll get you when I want you. I shouldn't have cracked me whip at you, so's not to frighten you. But you'll come back. You're growin' to be a big boy now, an' you won't be able to keep away from th' girls. Ol' Rowdy's goin' to keep you out of his mob. You'll come in on th' river again, an' I'll get you when I want you, me boy!"

Brindle drew one straight line as he raced back to the safety of the desert and the comfort of the brumbies' company—approached them confidently, winded from his long gallop, glad to be with them again.

But that mob had their own regulation; perhaps they considered that Brindle had infringed the laws. For they met him with lowered horns and would not allow him to enter. Old Rowdy took further steps: he chased the mickey from the mob and hunted him a quarter of a mile or more before he turned and left him standing there. The cows would not let him come any closer.

Yes—evidently those cattle who were only playing at being brumbies had their own rules: a member had to be one thing or the other. If he lingered in the open, unclosing the secrecy of the mob, the member was ostracized: he was a danger to the community, unfit to be a member of it.

Perhaps Brindle understood. He did not attempt to rejoin the mob, though he always kept in touch with them, and, on their visits to water, even if he dallied on the journeys, he was back at the desert by sunrise.

Almost it seemed that those semiwild cattle had a penal code, for after Brindle had been punished sufficiently he was admitted again to the mob on the old footing—save that Old Rowdy kept a stricter eye on him whenever Brindle showed signs of taking any of the privileges reserved for the lord of the mob.

At about the end of the year, after a few sporadic thunderstorms, the season broke. The rains pelted down and the ground picked up the water and took it to the creeks and rivers to be carried away. The whole earth woke with a rush. Apart from vegetation—which on one night would appear timorously over bare patches, and be choked in the crush as they jostled for living space next morning—the usual animal life and the usual pests came with the rains.

The flies, sandflies, and mosquitoes might have come down with the raindrops, so thick and so sudden were they. Bad enough on the open plains, here in the timbered country they were infinitely worse. Here, when there was no red blood for them to suck, they sank their probosces into the bark and leaves of trees and drank the sap. That insipid stuff cannot have given them much vigor, but it appeared to sustain life. And when they found an animal host they rushed to the feast. They made life almost unbearable for those on whom they fastened, and perhaps—if it had not been for the flush of rich feed and the consequent added strength of the animals—they would not have been able to withstand those attacks.

Here was a moot point: Did the flies and other suck-

ing pests come after the rains in order to take surplus sap from plants which had gorged too greedily on the abundance of plant-food made suddenly available, and to check the rich blood of the animals lest some eruptive disease serve the same purpose?—or did that flood of sap and rush of blood come after the rains just in order to feed the flies that would suddenly come to life then?

The earth itself teemed with life. Thousands of yellow centipedes seemed to come from every crack in the ground down which water poured, to live their little lives and die, or to go back to the shelter of Mother Earth when winter came. Glazed claypans which had known no life for months and months, which had been kiln-baked bricks in their dryness since the last rains, now came to life as soon as a film of a foot of water spread over them. Frogs in multitudes came from nowhere; every night their mighty chorus throbbed on the air, at times jamming it to sudden silence as the vibrations locked.

Snakes redoubled their numbers with the breaking of the rains. No one could guess where they had been or what they had been doing before, but—with the earth itself seeming to pulse as swarms of grasshoppers worked over it—the smaller grass snakes slid through the hoppers and found the going satisfactory; the grotesque bandi-bandi with its bands of jet black and startling white was also among the hoppers and smaller game; and the black, tiger, brown, green, and other varieties slid through the grass on the downs, disdain-

fully asserting their rights to go where they would in a world they owned. Over in the desert an occasional python drew his huge length over the ground, his tongue flickering, his eyes glaring, able to go months and months without food or drink, able to handle a kangaroo or a small calf in one meal. In addition, on the edge of the desert, there was the dread mulga snake, red in color, up to six feet long, with the temper of a frustrated devil and the pugnacity of a bereaved mother. Finally, there was the occasional death adder, met in unexpected places and feared mainly on account of its name.

With the possible exception of the python (which was big enough to command respect), it was doubtful whether any of these got much attention from the cattle, whether brumbies or station. Admittedly if a beast put down its head to get a mouthful of grass, and a snake advertised its presence in that tussock, the beast would withdraw its head and go elsewhere. But if a snake of any breed lay in the road of a mob of cattle on a pad or other wandering, it was the snake's business to look after its own welfare; the cattle gave it no precedence, acknowledged no prior right. They were certainly not going to go off a pad just because a snake happened to be using it.

Perhaps cattle did occasionally die from snake-bites. Certainly many snakes died that dared to contest the right-of-way of cattle on the move. Many cattle, indeed, were bitten on the legs; possibly the snake's fangs were too short, and the beast's skin too tough, so

that the venom collected in the protective fluffy hairs near the skin as it slid down the groove in the fang. But it would be safe to say that not one in a hundred suffered any ill effects.

In addition to the grasshoppers and flies, other insects seemed to be hatched by the rain. As ground-lice, scaly and buglike, moved slowly in teeming millions, an acre or more of earth would seem to be crawling from one place to another. Grubs of weird shapes and strange armoring came from nowhere; and many other wondrous things lived their brief span, obeyed the urge to increase and multiply, or formed food for predators that lived on them.

Goannas and other lizards: scaly-backs, sleepy, blue-tongues, and others down to the small sun lizard—all waxed fat and waddled clumsily through the good living placed before them. It was a time of full and plenty for all.

The sandflies forced the brumby mob out of the timber on the edge of the desert. They fed on the plains, mingled with station cattle, and helped to form mobs to ward off the sandflies. No communal laws governed their conduct during the two weeks of the sandflies' visit. There was only one law—the first: self-preservation. They herded together for their own protection.

As the sandflies eased, and as the outer ghilgais dried, the cattle drifted in again on to the bigger waters. The brumby mob went back to the timber. A few cows, and odd micks, stayed with the station cattle. About the same number of station cattle felt the urge to go bush

and accompanied Old Rowdy. Brindle's desires may have been to stay with the station cattle; but the instincts handed him by his wild mother dictated that he should stay with the wild mob, so he returned to the timber.

Early in April, when the southeasterlies had trodden the broad track they would sweep for the rest of the year, when the Mitchell grass was a golden green, the Flinders a startling red, when the birds were congregating and the ground was firm, with the sharp edge of winter in the air, the first branding muster of the year commenced.

Leonard drove to the Myall Yards where broncoing was in progress.

"There's the brindle cow what's th' mother of that brindle mick," Tom informed him. "She got another calf this year, a heifer, an' it must be by th' same bull—it's got th' crown mark on its forehead. It ain't as plain an' clean-cut as th' mick's, but it's there. She ain't as good a calf, neither."

"H'm-m-m," Leonard agreed. "There's no resemblance apart from the crown on the forehead, Tom. I wouldn't say it was by the same bull. It might be a streak in the old girl's breeding, or it might be telegonic influence."

"Eh?"

"We won't worry about the mysteries of eugenics, Tom. It's our job to breed commercial cattle. We'll stick to that."

"But what's that tele-stuff?" Tom wanted to know.

"It's a debatable point, Tom, over which many minds quarrel. It means the influence of a previous sire on subsequent progeny. As we don't know the sire of either the mick or this heifer, we're arguing in the dark. We can't provide evidence, let alone proof."

"What was th' boss talkin' about?" one of the men asked Tom.

"I don't know, an' I don't think he did, neither," Tom replied. "I think he just got a rush of hair to th' head."

Towards the end of the branding, the managing director of the company and part-owner, J. A. Brasston, visited Yalbungra. Like many really big men, he took interest and delight in what smaller men might consider trivial things. He reveled in getting back to nature, in shedding the rasping round of office life, in feeling again the life which had once been his own. Also—and in addition to taking an interest in the monetary returns from his property—he was at home with his men and made them feel at ease with him.

"Hulloa, Tom," he greeted the head stockman. "They tell me you're having a silent duel with a brindle mick. If I were a betting man, Tom, I'd put my money on you. How's the fight going, to date?"

"He's beat me every time so far," Tom admitted. "But I'll get him yet, Mr. Brasston. I'd give five bob of me own money to have him in th' yard now. We ain't seen him this muster yet."

"He's got a couple of thousand square miles in which to hide himself," Brasston commented. "That's Yal-

bungra's area. A lot of our boundaries are unfenced: he can wander farther. You'll get him some day, Tom. Don't worry unduly, old man—you'll get him."

Brasston, sitting on the rail of the yard beside George Leonard, was pretending to watch the branding while he took note of everything—even to the individual actions of the men and the flight of a kite hawk overhead.

"I've noticed, Leonard," said he, "that the boys in this country are very silent. All blacks have strictly limited vocabularies, but these Georgina boys seem to me to be dumb dictionaries."

"They do a fair bit of sign language," Leonard explained. "Also—and you can laugh at this if you wish, even as scientific bodies deride it—I believe they practice thought transference by telepathy."

"Laugh nothing," Brasston returned. "On second thought, though, I wouldn't like to suggest the idea to some of the dry old sticks of the Directorate at a board meeting. I can see old Brown's raised eyebrows and puckered face, and hear his question soured with lemon-juice: 'And are you intending to manage Yalbungra by telepathy and intuition, Mister Brasston?' No, Leonard; we'll keep that possibility to ourselves. Still, if you could give me an example, I promise not to use it as evidence against you."

"I'll try, Mr. Brasston. There's that boy Chinderah over there on the hind leg-rope. Here's Mungalo, here. Those boys can't possibly speak to each other without our hearing them. But if I can tell Mungalo to tell

Chinderah to do something, and if Chinderah does it without Mungalo's speaking to him, will that be a fair test?"

"Fair enough. Make it pretty tough, though, so as to convince even a skeptic like myself. Here you are: Tell Mungalo to tell Chinderah to go over to our car and bring the water-bag from it while he, Mungalo, relieves Chinderah of the hind leg-rope. If they do that without a spoken word passing, I'll be convinced there's something in your idea. I won't be a firm believer, George, but I'll agree that there are more things in heaven and earth than are printed in the newspapers!"

Leonard looked fixedly at Mungalo. Almost as if he had been pricked with a stick, Mungalo turned to Leonard, who jerked his head backwards in a come-hither action. Mungalo obeyed. Then Leonard gave the order—clearly, distinctly, but softly, so that Chinderah could not possibly hear a word of it, and added: "You stay belong-it that gate till Chinderah goes away from th' yard so's keep th' calves from that corner."

"That's a fair test," Brasston whispered. "That idea of putting the boy into the corner was a stroke of genius, Leonard. Now we'll see what happens."

Mungalo stood in his corner and stared at Chinderah. The latter responded even more quickly than had Mungalo to Leonard's silent call.

Mungalo stared at the other boy, and not a sound came from either of them.

Chinderah, with a puzzled expression in his eyes, shook his head.

Mungalo nodded emphatically, jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

"That's fair," Brasston muttered under his breath. "It *was* an unusual order, right out of the ordinary orbit of their lives, and it's quite fair to use a little gesticulation."

Chinderah threw the leg-rope on the ground in front of Mungalo, with an action that left no possible doubt that Mungalo was to use it. He turned and climbed the rails of the yard. With a certain degree of doubt, but with a fixity of purpose that indicated he knew what he was doing, he went to the motor car, unstrapped the water-bag hanging there, returned with it to the yard, hung it on a rail, climbed back in among the cattle, and resumed his work as if what he had done had been ordered in large print.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Brasston exploded. "Mumbo-jumbo and black magic! Wait till I tell old Brown about that! Well, I'll be double-damned!"

10. *The Aborigines*

AFTER DINNER THAT NIGHT, ON THE VERANDA AT THE Yalbungra homestead, Brasston and Leonard were discussing station work. The older man turned to the subject of the local aborigines.

"Tell me, George," Brasston said, "how many blacks do you reckon there are in this district? I had a word or two with the Administrator of Aboriginal Affairs before I left Brisbane. He reckoned, according to the census, there were two hundred and eighty-seven. How does he arrive at that?"

"God forbid I should probe the workings of the official mind!" Leonard replied. "I can only guess. This is my guess:

"Every district has a local Deputy-Administrator. And the blacks fear two things above all others—the Administrator in this world, and the debbil-debbil in the hereafter. One steals their bodies in this life; the other steals their spirits in death. Of course the Administrator is, in governmental parlance, the protector of the aborigines' welfare. I'm referring only to the country I know, of course, which is this district. They may work things differently in other areas.

"The Deputy is called on to supply a census of 'abos' so that some politician may play it to his own ends.

He, the Deputy, starts his census. He waits till some old buck comes in from the desert. He questions him:

"How many boy out belong-it desert?" he asks. Then, as the buck doesn't understand the beginning of the question, he prompts him: 'Big mob, eh?'

"That buck, like all blacks, is only too willing to oblige: 'Uh-huh. Big mob belong-it desert.'

"The census proceeds: 'Might-it 'bout three hundred, eh?'

"The buck is willing: 'Uh-huh. 'Bout three hun'red.'

"The Deputy does a bit of mental arithmetic. He draws fifty quid a year as Acting-Deputy, and he's got to balance that with the blacks under his administration. 'More than that,' he says, 'mine think-it. Him about five hundred, I think.'

"The buck is a gentleman: 'Uh-huh. Him 'bout five hun'red.'

"Later the Deputy queries a station boy: 'How many black-feller belong-it this country altogether?' he asks. 'Only little mob, eh?'

"Though the station boy is more or less civilized, he doesn't forget his gentlemanly instincts. He agrees: 'Uh-huh, on'y little mob.'

"'About fifty, I think, eh?' the Deputy prompts.

"'Tha's him, 'bout fifty,' the boy agrees.

"To be thorough in his investigation the Deputy continues: 'I think more like him only thirty, eh?'

"'Tha's right. Him on'y 'bout thirty,' the parrot responds.

"So the Deputy has completed his census. He bal-

ances the number against his allowance, throws in one or two for luck, deducts occasional ones, and—being a believer in odd numbers—makes it two-eighty-seven. That's the way they get those figures that are quoted in Parliament!"

"But we can't gainsay them, Leonard," Brasston warned. "When I had the temerity to tell the Administrator that his figures were wrong, he practically accused me, as the representative of big financial interests, of exploiting the cheap labor the aboriginal provided. Prime me on that subject, George."

"Exploiting! Sufferin' smoke! We pay Award wages, and a bit over; the Government takes more than half that to protect the aboriginals; they, the blacks, have a credit balance to their account of over two hundred thousand pounds; yet I had to raise hell to get an odd blanket for the old people in the camp last winter. There's plenty of money to spend on settlements that are viewed by the public, by members of Parliament, by tourists and missionaries. The Administrator takes photographs of *those* and publishes them in the papers. Yet the old people out here are left to die!

"Cheap labor! Let's consider this one station. I like the blacks; you and the other directors consider that decent charity should be shown them. We won't go into the matter of morality—that's a thing belonging to themselves. We'll deal with their bodily welfare.

"We employ four or five boys, and Mrs. Leonard has two or three gins working about the homestead. They're all paid. But, for every one of either sex who

is working and paid, there are two to three deadheads in the camps on the river. They do no work, but they're paid indirectly: they get beef, rations, odd garments of clothing, other things. The station finds all that. In reality, each actual employee is paid more than double the sum the Award says we are to pay him or her. Is that cheap labor?

"Take Chinderah, the best boy in the camp, and his gin Nellie, working in the house here. Each of them has been brought up in the ways of the white man and partly educated. But neither is to be trusted to work alone. It isn't that they're dishonest—it's just they haven't the mental ability to understand things. In their own way, and by their own method of reckoning, they'd neither of them be out a minute or an inch in their calculations of time or distance. But nothing *we* can do will ever teach them the difference between an inch and a mile, or between a minute and an hour, as we use those terms."

"I get you, George. Those swivel-chair cranks in offices in the city can't see things that way. The Administrator hinted rather directly that, if we didn't like his administration, he'd shift all the blacks off Yalbungra to some settlement."

"If he had a heart, instead of a rubber stamp, he'd shoot them all first as an act of kindness," Leonard exploded.

"You think they love this country?"

"I don't. Love, as we interpret the word, isn't in the blacks' vocabulary. They don't know its meaning; they

have no word for it. But to shift them from this country would be a sure sentence of death to them. The country is part of them. It's more than a part of them—it's actually *them*!

"Let's look at another case of the same sort—or near enough to serve as a comparison. You know that hybrid gidyea that grows in this country—thousands of square miles of it?"

"The *Acacia Cambagei*, to give it its botanical name," Brasston interpolated.

"Thanks, Mr. Brasston. That's its Sunday name. We bushmen have a stronger word for it, meaning the same thing but emphasizing its hybrid character. We both know that tree. Think of it: the thing's ugly—squat, warped, twisted, bent with many droughts, old with an age beyond reckoning, and it has no joy in life at all. It hasn't even got enough kick to emit the horrid smell of the real gidyea when it flowers. It's too taken up with the precarious business of life to waste time in manufacturing odors. Time and again, the seeds of that tree have been taken away and planted in what we consider more congenial conditions. Will it grow there? It will not! Yet here it covers thousands of square miles. This is its home. It lives here. It won't live anywhere else. This country is as much a part of that tree as *it* is a part of the country.

"Need I continue my argument about the cruelty of transplanting other faunas native to the country? Take them away, and it will make but little difference in the working of the pastoral properties—but arraign the

person who gives that order and stand him on trial for mass murder!"

"You're running hot, George," Brasston chaffed. "But even if you are steaming at the joints, I agree with every word you say. While we're on the subject of the aborigines I want a bit more advice from you. First, I warn you: I'm going to quote you, so be correct and careful in what you say. When I asked the Administrator how he was going to collect the blacks he told me quite off-handedly that they'd do it by smoke signals. What's the strength of this smoke-signal stuff?"

"I've read about it in papers and in magazines, and I've heard officials discussing it," Leonard replied. "According to them it's what might be called the aboriginal equivalent of the Morse Code. They make a fire, raise a smoke, cut that smoke in dots and dashes, and spell out words with it. That's the idea, ain't it?"

"It is. What's your version?"

"I've discussed it with old blacks, and I've asked men wiser in the ways of the native than I am myself. They agree, and I accept their interpretation. But before telling you what it is, I'll knock the conventional notion—that the blacks 'spell out messages' by means of smoke signals. This is simply not true. Not a single tribe of the blacks has a written language; none of them even has an alphabet—or what we would call an alphabet. How are they going to spell a word when they have no spelling for that word—haven't even any letters with which to spell it? I remember enough of

my schooldays to recollect that Euclid said that certain things were absurd. This is one of them.

"Here is what I accept as the correct explanation, as it has been explained to me by men who know—blacks as well as whites:

"The smoke is used only as a means to attract attention. When attention has been attracted, and when an answering smoke is given in reply, then the message starts. I give you the method of transmission as it was told to me:

"Only the old-men in the camp can send and receive. The term 'old-man' doesn't necessarily signify age, as it would among us; with them it denotes wisdom, learning, witchcraft perhaps, or even mysticism. I imagine that, in a way, an 'old-man' corresponds to the witch-doctor among the natives of other lands.

"The old-man goes into some sort of trance. Remember, Mr. Brasston, we're away out of our depth now, dealing with things we don't understand, and using terms that may not be exact. I'm trying to express another people's ideas in *our* language, which hasn't the words to express those ideas. Well, the old-man at the other end goes into a similar trance—or, as a boy once said to me, 'Him think bout nothin' at all.' The old-man at this end concentrates; while the one at the other end keeps his mind blank—vacant; and in *some* way a transference of ideas takes place.

"I've given you just the outline of the thing; lest you consider me a bigger fool than I really am, I won't try to fill in the details. You saw those boys at the yard

when Mungalo gave Chinderah the order about the water-bag. They were only youngsters, unlearned in the art of mumbo-jumbo, as you expressed it. But give them another twenty years each, steep them in the magic of the tribe, and then consider what they might be able to do in the way of telepathy. Could they transmit and receive mental messages over a distance? I don't attempt to answer my own question. I leave it to you."

"And I'm not going to try to answer it," Brasston replied. "As you said: We're away out of our depth. You told me the day after I arrived—though I didn't take any notice of it at the time—that the camps at the head of the Mulligan River, out in the Toko Ranges, knew I was here. How did they find that out?"

"Old Monkey, a gin from a camp down on the river, told me they'd had word from the Toko. That's over a hundred miles distant, and there hadn't been time for any runner to go out there and return."

"You're making me feel spooky," Brasston complained with a laugh. "Now tell me about this *pituri*. What is it?"

"Pronounced *pitcherry*," Leonard corrected.

"And known to botanists as *Duboisia hopwoodii*!" Brasston returned with another laugh. "Got you there, George—I bet you didn't know that. I gather that the administration look on it somewhat as a Rechabite regards rum. They reckon that it is undermining the aborigines' constitutions, and that it is used to stupefy fish, to poison spears, and to play Helen Blazes gen-

erally. Old Monkey might have got the information by smoke signals."

"If ever he sends out a smoke signal that he wants the blacks to gather for transportation, then every old boy and every gin will hide in the gorges at the head of the Mulligan," Leonard said grimly. "He'll have to smoke 'em out—not signal them out. But you were asking me about this Du-dubois—du-something—"

"Pronounced *pitcherry*, George!"

"The stuff's so seldom used now that it's almost a curiosity. Once on a time, I understand, it was comparatively common. It's a human intoxicant only, and I don't know whether the punch is in the plant itself or in the way it is prepared. But it *isn't* used to stun fish or poison spears. They chew it.

"In the good old days, so I'm told, a pituri carrier had the right of the road. Blacks from the Georgina used to trade the stuff with tribes all over Queensland. They used to barter it with tribes on the seacoast, hundreds of miles distant, in the East and North. A pituri carrier was the only one who had the right to go unmolested through another tribe's towri. As you may have heard, it used to be sudden death for a boy of one tribe to stray over his boundary on to the territory of another tribe. But the pituri carrier could go where he wished.

"The stuff's supposed to grow only in the sandhills west of here—maybe forty to sixty miles out. It's a small shrub, something like a hop bush or sandal wood, and it's the leaves and twigs that are valuable. Mind

you, I've never had anything to do with the thing. I haven't even seen the plant. I'm just telling you what the boys have told me.

"After a good season, and when the weather's cool, the boys go to gather it. As it's fifty to sixty miles from the river, they have to put down depots. They get a kangaroo-skin water-bag, and this they carry out a certain distance to serve as a depot. Another may be placed farther on. Then a couple of boys make a rush for it. They use the skins of water; they get out to the pituri plants; they gather what they can; they come back again and make use of the depots they've placed there."

"Young leaves and twigs, George?"

"So I'm told. Then they prepare the stuff. Listen to this, Mr. Brasston, and, with me, marvel at the means by which the blacks discovered the properties of this plant, and how they learned to prepare it. It's always been a mystery to me.

"They take a sprig of pituri in one hand and a sprig of wilga or gidyea in the other. They hold these over the fire and mix the ashes of the two as they fall into a coolamon. Then the ashes are 'bound' with fibers. Formerly, I understand, they used hair, kangaroo fur, or fine roots for binders; but since they've learned something of science they use jute from old bags. The mixed ashes of the pituri and gidyea are chewed *into* those strings, which serve as a binding agent. The chewing goes on until the finished article looks something like a bit of dark cobbler's wax, of about the length and thickness of your thumb. Then it's ready to be used."

"And how do they use it? Where does the kick come?"

"A buck usually carries the prepared pituri behind his ear; a gin may keep it in her dilly-bag. When they decide on a pituri spree, they all sit in a circle. One begins to chew, and when he or she has had enough it's passed to the next in the circle. It goes the round till the last person puts it behind his ear or into her dilly-bag. It never seems to lose its potency—it's just as strong when it's old and dirty as when it was fresh and fairly clean. It keeps its kick till it's destroyed or lost."

"How does it work on them?"

"After a bit—and that isn't very long—one of the circle will show that the stuff's got in its punch: he or she will stand up and start to sing, or dance, or try to fly, and generally act—with variations—exactly as we more civilized and enlightened people do when we've taken aboard more whisky than we can carry. The eyes roll as violently, and the legs stagger at the knees and refuse to carry the white man's burden. In other words, they're blithered."

"Happily so?"

"Usually. Even as with us lords of creation and leaders of civilization, it affects them in various ways. I've seen old bucks get as miserable as a sick hen and as pugnacious as a boar pig; I've seen gins pick up a stick and lay about them as if they meant to do some harm. Usually, though, life is just one grand sweet song to

them till the stuff runs its course, and then they go to sleep."

"It sends 'em to sleep, does it?"

"They just drop off where they sit or stand. They lie huddled in grotesque shapes, dead to the world, till they wake on the morrow."

"What about the morning after? That's the vital point."

"Pretty cruel. Boys have tried to tell me what it's like. I'd gather that the tongue is furred, the head is splitting, there are spots before the eyes, the belly is a furnace. But I'd say it does them no great harm. In a few hours they're their own bright and bonny selves once again, fit for work, and I sometimes think that the bit of a variety has been good for 'em."

"I'll take your word for it, Leonard—I don't feel inclined to try it myself! Thanks, anyway. It was all most interesting. In fact, I feel now like the billy-goat that chewed the dictionary—just full of information. Well, I suppose it's time we went to bed.

"I'll be leaving in the morning, as you know. I've given Mrs. Leonard a number of gewgaws and trumpery trinkets to give the house gins. You dip into the station store, Leonard, and give the boys a few pipes and tobacco as a present from the Firm. And we won't forget the old people in the camps on the river: hand out a few dresses and an occasional pair of pants to them, George. They don't need much in the way of attire. I understand dress is a communal affair with them—to be used by anybody who is going visiting."

"They'll appreciate that, Mr. Brasston."

"And we won't send in a debit note to the Administration of Aboriginal Affairs, either. We must run true to form, Leonard. We're bloated capitalists, draining the resources of the country for our own selfish needs, exploiting the innocent native for our own foul purposes. We don't do *any* good—it isn't in us. Right now, if only the Administrator knew, he'd jump to the conclusion that we had some ulterior motive behind such a simple thing as appreciating the native. We can only do good by stealth, George. Give the blacks a bit of a present from the Company, and charge it up to 'general expenses' or think up other form of figure-juggling. G'night."

II. *The Outcast*

BRASSTON LEFT THE STATION NEXT MORNING TO RETURN to his hated office in the city. The old gins observed their usual custom with those whom they considered important or worthy of their affection: they "cried" him.

Brasston, in his business of packing, walked from the store to the house, passing through a cluster of about a dozen gins who were wailing like lost dingoes. Old Monkey lifted her face as he went by—a face old and wrinkled with years, almost ludicrous in its sorrow, with a tide-mark showing where the wash of the tears had swept a track through the dust and grime on her cheeks, had overflowed the many channels and spread out on the flats. Every one of the other gins was weeping, too, sobbing unrestrainedly, howling while their shoulders heaved and their bodies bent in sympathy with their emotions.

"What's wrong with those old girls?" Brasston asked Leonard.

"They're sorry to see you go. They're crying you away."

"Eh?"

"It's a custom that has become a ritual."

"Good God! This is damnably embarrassing, George.

I didn't know they were that fond of me. It's genuine—the tears are running bankers in the channels. I hate to hurt their feelings like that. I wish they'd stop. Ah! They've stopped—thank goodness.”

The gins had suddenly left off wailing, instantaneously, abruptly. Leonard did not consider it necessary to tell the guest of honor that those gins had ceased their howling by common impulse. The tears dried; the faces broke into happy grins as some funny little story was being told by one of them—funny to minds that found humor in stories rigorously banned by white people. And Leonard knew that in just a moment those grins would, in turn, be wiped off in the flick of a second, that the wails would start again, that the tears would flow as freely as before.

“Damn it all, George, I can't stand this!” Brasston complained as the “crying” was suddenly resumed. “I hate the thought of commercializing sentiment, but spread this handful of silver among them; say to them that I appreciate their affections, but tell them to go away and do something else. I never knew before I was so popular. I don't know what Mrs. Brasston would say if she knew all the girls cried when I left the place!”

The gins dispersed, chattering gaily among themselves, happy that their job had been well done, each clutching a silver coin.

The station work continued. The brumby mob at the edge of the desert had ideal conditions. The flies had gone; the grass was rich; water was within easy walking

distance at night; no stockmen worked that outside fringe to disturb them. They lived their own lives.

Brindle, now about a year and a half old, had developed and taken definite shape. He was a bull—every inch a bull: masculine, dominant, assertive. Though he had not reached full physical development, his sexual powers were at the flood—full and without the wisdom of age to lend caution. He may have weighed about twelve hundred pounds and he was a perfect cross between his sire and his dam.

He inherited his father's quality, his early maturity, his size, and particularly, the crown on his forehead. From his mother's side he got his sweeping horns, his rakishness, his activity, his ability to throw miles behind him. Though his hide was marked with brindle stripes, his skin was silky and loose. His father gave him the stolid mental outlook that weighed things deliberately; his mother's gifts were wariness, suspicion of all things unknown, the ability to act on a mental and physical decision at lightning speed.

With plenteous feed about him wherever he wished to go, with a full belly and physical contentment, he still had one urge—the ceaseless nagging toward the gratification of his sex instinct. But Old Rowdy had taught him his lesson. It would be suicide to challenge Old Rowdy's jealous wrath, and he had no intention of ending his life. He did not venture among Old Rowdy's cows when reason told him to keep at a distance. The nights were long and distances were short; Brindle loitered on the plains among the station cattle

at night. He had an instinctive knowledge of the etiquette of war and of the wiles of battle, and he improved upon these with practice, gaining confidence after many victories. The rising sun frequently found him a couple of miles from the sanctuary of the desert timber.

He would stand in statuesque immobility while the sun played flames of living fire along his coat; he would rake up the dust in streams over his shoulder while he bellowed his challenges; he would walk daintily about his mob of admiring cows; then, disdainfully, almost unappreciative of the favors he had received, he would turn and stalk majestically to the desert.

Occasionally, and unsuccessfully, he strove to induce a cow to come with him. He would head her off a few times as she started her walk to the river; he would push her and block her; he might even follow her for a mile or more in his efforts to gain his ends; but invariably Brindle went to his shelter alone. At odd times he went with slow blood trickling from a long wound on his body where the horn of another bull in combat had raked him; sometimes he went covered with dust and coated with filth when a stronger bull had rolled him on the ground; occasionally, though very rarely, he dared to challenge Old Rowdy as he drew near the mob. He would rake dirt and bellow, puff gusts of dust in the air with giant breaths, loll his tongue and sidle towards the older bull. But he always broke off the possible engagement long before their horns locked or

their bodies met. Brindle remembered Old Rowdy's ability.

Winter came with its icy winds, its snapping cold, its huge mobs of birds—and with the world travelers who juggled Hemispheres as easily as a carpenter plays with an inch-rule, making the Georgina a route in their passage.

The cattle retained their condition and vigor. There was no frost in that country to cut softer herbage, though some, like *Sesbania* pea and others, though full and lush today were dry stalks when the sun rose on the morrow.

The wild dogs, the dingoes, moved when the biting cold of winter took the land. This was their mating period, when the urge sent them wandering in packs, when they ventured out from the timbered country and on the open downs—though they preferred to follow the course of the river with its shelter.

Dingoes were part of the cattle's education. They knew the difference between the dingo and the trained dog, just as they realized that a man on foot and a man on horseback were two different things. But Brindle shivered and stepped nervously on his way to water that night when the dingoes howled as they ran the course of the river. He knew dogs—and a dingo was a dog. Brindle drank hastily, turned, and made his way back to the desert without haste but with a certain speed, and he did not loiter with the station cattle that night. He remembered!

Age was beginning to have its effect on Old Rowdy.

Early in August, when the winter was at its top, he became sluggish. He usually stayed with his mob of cows, though he did not lead them. At times he did not even mingle with them, but lay at a distance while he chewed his cud.

Brindle was young, and winter could not sap his ardor. He roamed through the cows during Old Rowdy's temporary and partial absences. At that season of the year the cows also were comparatively dormant. Brindle sought to press his attentions upon a cow that had attracted him. Though she did not actually resent his advances, she did not appreciate them: she moved away. Brindle followed, becoming more importunate. The cow ran from the mob. Brindle followed. The cow ran past the spot where Old Rowdy was lying, chewing the cud. Brindle followed, taking courage from the fact that Old Rowdy did not rise to his feet and intervene. But Brindle, in his excitement, missed one significant point: Old Rowdy had stopped chewing the cud.

The cow ran into the mob, seeking safety in numbers. Brindle followed her there and, in the shuffling of feet as the mob moved, he may not have noticed the drumming of hooves behind him.

Suddenly he was lifted as one of the older bull's horns slid up the inside of his hind leg and lodged in his crotch. He was swung round, unbalanced, sent spinning as he stumbled to keep his footing. And like a shot from a gun—or, to be more exact, like a stone from a sling—Old Rowdy followed him!

Brindle was hot with passion. Though he felt respect for the old bull—a respect engendered by fear—desire was running rampant and he forgot everything else. He picked himself up and stood balanced; he poised a second; he charged to meet the avalanche in motion which was bearing down on him.

Brindle was more than valiant—he was momentarily mad. His horns locked with Old Rowdy's; his loins bent as he pushed; his neck muscles bulged; his feet scraped and fought for a footing. He was a bull—which means that his muscles and build were developed for just such a combat as this one. A yoke of working bullocks—a pair of them—each weighing no more than Brindle, had often pulled a wagon loaded with eight tons. Admittedly, they had been trained to that job. But they had not the intense muscular development of a bull; they were pulling in cold blood, to win a wager for their driver; they lacked the incentive of love and life to urge them to do their utmost. Brindle arched his loins as his body took the strain; he lowered his head to get a better leverage; his hooves tore the earth to dust as they gripped.

And Old Rowdy, hero of a hundred fights, pushed the young bull back as if Brindle were a paperweight, brushed his guard aside, got his horn under Brindle's brisket and lifted—tossing the head laden with that weight which would stagger a bull camel, while his muscles corded and stood out in great knots, cracked, and sprang back into place again.

Brindle hit the ground, seemed to bounce, landed on

his feet, and in one movement he was that fastest thing known in animal action—a retreating bull. He went blind, straight, regardless of anything in his path. He knocked a calf aside as easily as the bow of a ship parts the waters, and he did not falter in his stride as he raced ahead.

Old Rowdy was getting on in years, and he was sluggish. He was more than sluggish: he was lethargic. He did not follow Brindle farther than the edge of his mob of cows. He did not even trouble to bellow his triumph: he went back to the place from which he had come, lay down with care, and resumed the chewing of his cud.

Brindle joined up more and more with the station cattle. He became one of a mob of night-drinkers that fed wide during the day. A month or two went by, and he gained confidence: no stockmen had molested him, no ridden horse had been seen by him, no taint or scent of man was in the air. He grew physically and became more settled mentally. If he ever asked himself a question, it may have been: "Why should I worry about those night-drinking brumbies when I can get all I want among the quieter station cattle?"

Towards the end of October, the eternal winds held their breath for a day or two. Then they came again with a rush and a roar, running the same roads, pushing as fervently, jostling as rudely. But there was one big difference: this time the winds had dropped their ice and were drawing their breath straight from the furnace of Summer.

All the bulls woke to a new ardor as the blood ran warmer in their veins. Older ones who had gone into semi-hibernation now came out from their solitary hiding places, bellowed their might and their desire, raked dust, and sought favors.

Brindle mixed in many a skirmish and fought an occasional desperate battle. With his increasing skill and confidence he stalked into the meeting places at the waters; he bellowed his might, flung forth his challenges, raked dust, and dared others of his sex to stand before him.

Smaller waters began to dry. A thousand or more cattle had been drinking at Whistler Hole. On his way up the road that ran parallel with the river, Leonard got out of his car when he reached the homestead and called one of the men to him.

"You'd better take Toby the boy with you tomorrow, Mick, and go and have a look at Whistler. I saw a lot of kite hawks perched in the trees and flying over it when I was coming home. That's a sign the water's getting low, fish are turning up, odd things may be dying. Take Toby with you tomorrow and go and shift the cattle off it to the Junction Hole, down the river."

Brindle came in with the mob with which he was running. He sniffed the polluted water, turned from it, and, with that disdainful air of owning the world, turned to go to a better water that he knew was down the river. And as he left the hole he came face to face with two mounted men, with a couple of dogs at heel!

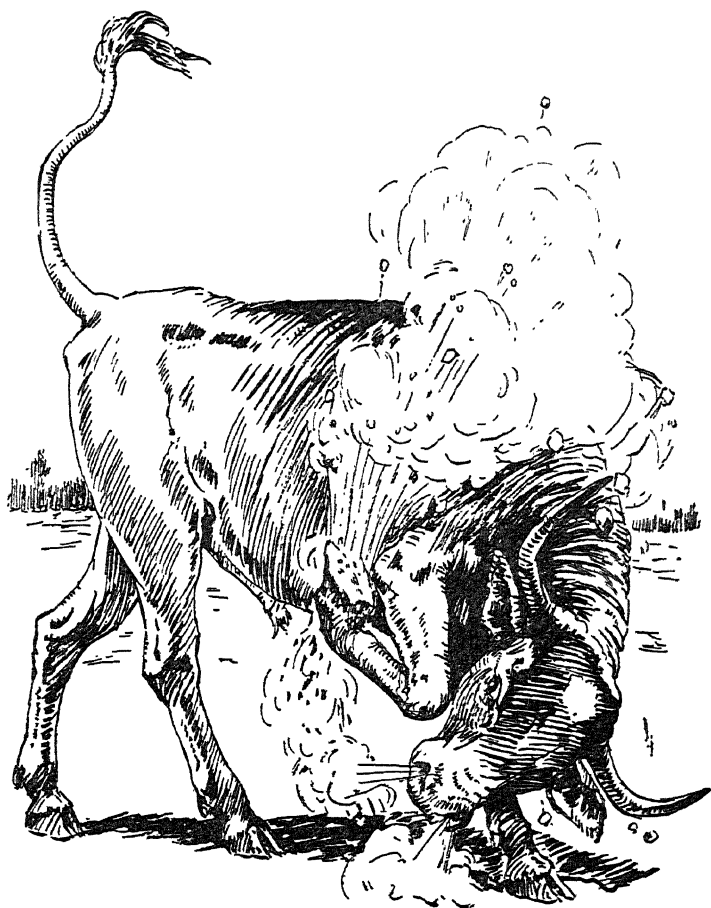
The effects of two months of civilized living in-

stantly fell from him, and he acted as his mother's breeding taught him: he was a galloping streak before the men had time to wink an eye or draw a breath. The crack of a whip sounded after him, increasing his efforts—Brindle was a wild thing again, a brumby bull, a night-drinker and a hider in the timbers!

He galloped till he was pumping bellows of wind to his lungs, till his body refused to keep up the pace any longer. Then he fell into a steady trot, never stopping till he was safe in the timber at the edge of the desert, within sound of the wild mob (though not within Old Rowdy's sight). And now he spun about and stood, a red-eyed fiend, impatient on his feet, his flanks heaving, his tail twitching. He wheeled about and looked behind, suspicious of every falling leaf or chirping insect. He raked dust in a challenge to the unknown fear which beset him, and he could not stay still. As he listened he seemed to draw comfort from the challenging roar that came after from afar—a bellow full of hate, a threat to any usurper, a warning that Old Rowdy would deal death to any bull that contested his rights.

Brindle understood. Though he had not advertised his presence in any way, and though no sound or sight of him could possibly have reached Old Rowdy, the old bull was fully aware of his presence—just as Brindle knew that the brumby mob was only a couple of miles away. He did not answer Old Rowdy's challenge.

Mick, with Toby helping him, rounded up the cattle at Whistler. They turned thankfully from the liquid mud stirred by many cattle. It was only a matter of



He raked dust in a challenge to the unknown fear.

starting most of them, and they would themselves wander on down the river to Junction. The distance was less than six miles, which was nothing to the stock. As for the obstinate mob, they lagged behind, they had to be put together, driven all the way to the new water—some two hundred of them, fools who would rather stay and perish than use their knowledge of waters. And, after the mob had been rounded up and started, there were twenty-eight plain turkeys with them!

"Strike me dead!" Mick used his favorite expletive. "Look at them fool birds. Two kicks with their legs, an' two flips with their wings, an' they'd be at Junction. Give 'em a start with your whip, Toby."

As soon as ever the whip sounded, the birds rose in the air, swung, and made back to the drying hole.

"A man can't wheel 'em on horseback," Mick complained. "I'd like to take 'em to water. Ever seen turkeys perish on a hole, Toby?"

"No more," Toby grunted. "Sometimes him might. Might-it they frighten belong-it somethin' down th' river."

On his return, Mick reported the occurrence to Leonard.

"I'll come with you tomorrow, Mick," Leonard replied. "I've known waxbill finches perish; but I've never known the bigger birds like broilgas and turkeys get bushed before."

On the morrow, when the straggling cattle were put together, the turkeys were counted: twenty-eight of them. They looked bedraggled, with feathers awry;

and the water that had been in the hole was now caked mud.

"Take 'em steady," Leonard warned his men. "Don't crack a whip or get near them. Work real wide. If we get them a mile or so away, they might go on to Junction themselves."

The turkeys stalked with the cattle, following pads, seemingly used to having the men work them warily. Before they had gone half a mile one nervous brute opened his wings and flew back to the dry waterhole. The infection seemed to spread, and—before the cattle had traveled a full mile—the whole of the mob had returned for a drink to a place where there was no water!

The following morning only twenty-six turkeys joined the dozen or more cattle that were put together. Two bundles of feathers, with beaks agape, wheezed hoarsely till they were mercifully knocked on the head.

Those turkeys went with the cattle—some wide out, some in the mob—and Leonard was on the point of congratulating himself that he had succeeded when, a couple of miles from the starting point, a calf tripped and bellowed a note of pain as a cow pushed it aside. The turkeys rose as one bird, strung out in the air, swung round, and flew back to the dry hole!

"Well, I'll be double-damned!" Leonard exploded. "If we don't get those birds tomorrow, it's going to be too late."

Next day fewer than twenty birds took up the trail.

The men's hopes were high: the birds were weak; they were too dispirited to be nervous; they fell in as if trained, and marched with the driven cattle.

"Keep well out there," Leonard advised. "These cattle don't want driving. They know where they're going. We'll just follow behind and let the turkeys go with them."

Something disturbed the turkeys again just as the men were dreaming of success. They rose heavily, weakly, and in labored flight returned to Whistler.

"There are thousands and thousands more wild turkeys in this district," Leonard complained. "Why should I take an interest in this brainless dozen or so? I'll give it a final try tomorrow."

The next day, when Leonard went to shift what cattle might have returned, he rode about the hole. There were twenty-eight bundles of feathers that had been turkeys. Some were scattered, strewn by carrion; others were in various stages of decomposition; and an odd one still panted while myriad ants ate living flesh from what had been a magnificent bird!

"Well, I'll be double-damned!" said Leonard again. "I never knew a thing like that happen before."

The kites soared on still wings, forever wheeling over the dry hole, knowing that some scrap of life might yet perish there, affording them a meal. An old-man goanna scuttled by, his belly rustling as it brushed the dust. The crows from near-by trees cawed harshly as they too came to attend the burial rites. The bare-

picked skeleton of a fish lay glued in the mud. The flies buzzed ceaselessly over the carrion. And on the bare bank of the waterhole a lazy whirlwind swung as if guided by sensitive fingers, felt about it, and picked up the feathers of what had been a plain turkey.

12. *The Challenge*

AFTER THE OCTOBER BRANDING, AND WHEN THE cattle had been settled down for the dry end of the year, the head stockman reported to the manager: "There's a good few brindle calves knockin' about. There's no doubt they're by that there Brindle: every one of 'em has th' crown on its forehead."

"What are they like, Tom?"

"Pretty good, every one of 'em. They'd all show quality if it wasn't for them brindle markin's."

"If they're good it doesn't matter much; but brindles look bad in a well-bred herd. Apart from that, Tom, you've got a personal feeling towards that bull, haven't you?"

"I'd like to get th' mongrel."

"Righto. Please yourself and make your own arrangements. As it's a personal feud, I won't interfere. What are you going to do?"

"I'll take ol' Waukaby with me. He's a good boy. He ain't too good at fast work now—he's a bit ol'. But he's one of th' best trackers on th' place. I'll take Waukaby with me an' go an' interview Mister Blasted Brindle. We'll find him an' shoot him if we can't do nothin' else with him."

"Do as you wish, Tom."

The season seemed to be coming early that year. Quite good storms had fallen, filling ghilgais well out from the river, on the fringe of the desert, and green grass kept all the cattle in the best of condition.

Tom and the boy, with a spare riding horse each and a couple of packhorses, started from the southern end to work the edge of the downs country near the desert. Tom rode to every mob of cattle to examine them, and every brindle calf that he saw drew oaths and strange threats from him.

"He's a wanderer an' a worker," Tom told himself, speaking aloud when alone, as most bushmen do. "Them brindle calves is all over th' place. If they was all in one mob I'd have a lead where to look for him. I suppose, all told, I've seen an' branded forty brindles. I've got 'em scattered in mobs thirty mile along th' river frontage. He spreads his favors, does Brindle!"

Waukaby picked up the tracks of a mob of about thirty head working into the desert.

"Keep your eye on them tracks, Waukaby," Tom advised. "This is th' brumby mob. This is what Brindle's runnin' with."

Waukaby followed those tracks from the downs country where the mob had been out to feed at night, running them with all the certainty of a city man reading signposts. He pointed out to Tom where they had been feeding, where they had come in to water at a ghilgai, where there had been a bit of a scrummage when a strange bull had tried to mix with the mob, and where, apparently at about daylight, they had strung out and

walked in a straight line back to their destination in the desert.

Once they reached the timbered country, in that soft sand and spinifex, their tracks were as easy to follow as a tramline along a suburban road. Fresh droppings, steaming hot and moist, told the men that they were nearing their mark. The spare horses were left behind, and the men rode on alone.

Old Rowdy was waiting for them when they came upon him and his mob. Almost the bull sneered at them, as if to say: "I knew you were coming, half an hour ago. I could have been miles away by this time if I'd been afraid of you. What the devil do you want here? Get your job done and leave us alone!"

Tom rode about the small mob, which was slightly nervous and inclined to break. He took note of all of them and addressed the lord of the herd: "There's no cleanskins here, an' you ain't doin' no harm so long's you behave yourselves. You're a good sort of a bull, Ol' Rowdy—a real good sort—an' it's a pity you can't behave in a white man's ways. I'll leave you alone now; but if ever you get troublesome I'll wipe th' lot of you out just as soon as look at you—an' that goes for you, too, Ol' Rowdy!"

Tom and the boy picked up their horses and rode on through the desert. Less than a mile from the mob they found a new track—that of a single bull!

"That's him!" Tom exploded excitedly. "Get your eye on them tracks, Waukaby. They're on'y a couple of hours old, by th' looks of them droppin's. We'll

follow 'em till about sundown; then we'll go out on th' downs, find a ghilgai, camp there th' night, come back on th' tracks in th' mornin', follow 'em, and get Brindle tomorrow. I've *got* to get him tomorrow. Me time's just about up, an' there's work needin' me at th' station. I can't put in all me time chasin' a mongrel brindle mickey."

The men camped the night on a ghilgai. When they went to their swags, one solitary cloud floated low on the northern horizon, and distant flashes of light told of a storm in the distance. Tom ignored the signs, and even Waukaby—a better weather prophet than the white man—did not turn his head to look. And a couple of hours before daylight next morning both men were wakened suddenly by a tearing crack of thunder, as if a giant sheet of calico were being torn by a monster power, and the rain pelted down on them as the lightning shot streaks of fire across the sky!

"I don't mind gettin' wet," Tom told himself miserably. "Even if th' rations ain't covered up we'll be home today, an' a bit of a starve for a meal or two won't kill us. But I do hate losin' them brindle boy's tracks: this rain's goin' to wipe 'em off the ground as easy as a sponge cleans a slate. This storm's goin' to put all cattle on th' move: Brindle's goin' for to be blasted miles away in the mornin'. You win, Brindle. But we'll meet again, young feller-me-lad. We'll meet again!"

The storms continued, bringing with them the practical certainty of an early and bounteous season. The creeks trickled and the river came down a half-banker.

There was no cattle work of any moment: there was an abundance of grass and water everywhere. The cattle were right wherever they wished to go, and the station work continued with routine stuff till the real wet season should come which would put things right for the following year.

There was a mob of bullocks farther up the river, a couple of hundred miles or so. They had come in from the west. For these the owner, not sure of the season, had procured agistment on Meetucka, inside fenced country. As soon as the river had run and the roads were open, he wanted to get the bullocks on to his station inside. He had at least two purposes: he did not want to pay unnecessary agistment on his cattle when he could carry them on his own property; and he did want to get his bullocks home and settled as soon as possible, so that they would fatten early and meet an anticipated seasonable market. The bullocks were therefore mustered and put in charge of a drover; and soon they were traveling down the western side of the river in a season so good that they fattened as they traveled.

Brindle had been cast out from the brumby mob. He roamed where he would and took favors where he would. Occasionally, when a more powerful bull was in charge of a mob of cows, Brindle found it convenient to wander further. And he never had to go far before blatant bellows and sobs told of some herd bull's being ousted by Brindle. The flies and other stinging pests

which followed the rain hunted him temporarily out of the timber at the edge of the desert.

The drover, Ted Langdon, with his men had brought the western bullocks down the river on to Yalbungra. He camped them at night a mile or more out from the river, and the bullocks, used to the etiquette of the road, went to night camp full and contented. No one anticipated any trouble: the cattle were well fed, happy, quiet, even a bit playful, though they were "a bit long in the tooth," and their lancelike horns showed that their breeding had been careless, they were well trained and easy to handle.

The sun had no more than set when a bank of clouds came up from the north—sullen, leaden, heavy, and ominous.

"I don't expect no trouble," Ted told the horse-tailer of the camp. "Anythin' might happen on a night like this. You'd better leave two spare horses tied up, Jim. That's three night-horses all told: one on watch, two tied in case we needs 'em. There's Dandy an' Dancer an' Splinter—get them three."

By midnight the sky was completely overcast, with the distant rumble of thunder coming ever closer. The cattle were quiet, lying contentedly, chewing the cud. As the man on watch rode past them singing, those on the outside rolled an eye without stopping the motion of their jaws.

Brindle sensed the new mob of cattle. Perhaps he scented them, or heard the clang of hobbles or the jingle of horse bells, or perhaps the air carried some

unheard message. He worked his way towards the camping bullocks, half-fearful, curious, drawn as if by a magnet.

The man on watch noticed that here and there a bullock stopped chewing the cud, lifted its head, and gazed fixedly in one direction. Peering earnestly, he thought he saw what looked like a mammoth in slow motion, so nebulous that it might have been the torn fragment of a cloud brushing the earth. He swung his horse Splinter round to have a better look, and—

Crack! With the instantaneous animal action that has no parallel, those fifteen hundred bullocks were on their feet as one beast, heads down, tails high, racing at full speed! In one fraction of a second they were a tractable mob, resting quietly in perfect content; in the next fraction they were a speeding avalanche, a berserk mob bereft of reason, galloping blindly in frantic fear of something or of nothing! They went as one mob, thundering the ground under them, shaking the air itself with the pace of their passage.

Splinter, when that crack reached him, was shaking his head in a form of protest against going out to have a look at something away from the mob. Wise in the ways of cattle on camp at night, he did not hesitate; perhaps he did not think; he just acted—he spun on his heels, pulled himself together, bunched his muscles, and sprang like a shot from a catapult into action. The mob had not hit its second stride before he was racing with them, galloping up one wing of that mad phalanx,

boring in and doing the job of a night horse on the roads: Win or die!

The men had been sound asleep in the camp when that thunder of hooves came to them. Ted, the boss drover, left his swag with a bound, fully dressed but for his boots. He seemed to gather his boots and slip them on while he was in the air, and he was buttoning his trousers with one hand while he slung the reins over Dancer's neck with the other.

Bill, the other man, was not a flash behind his boss. He was only a paid man, a stockman, a fellow who growled incessantly. A nark, he made trouble in the camp and, but for the difficulty of replacing him when few men were traveling the roads, Ted would have sacked him. He spoke disparagingly of men who put will into their work, who had their employer's interests at heart; he found fault with the food, the plant, the men who composed the camp. But now—though when he mounted Dandy and went after those bullocks he knew that he was going to rub shoulders with death, that one false move would mean a broken leg or worse—he pushed aside another man who started to take his place, swung on to Dandy, and raced out into the night.

Dancer and Dandy had been dozing when the crash came. Each had its head hung low, its lower lip pendulous, its eyes half-shut. But, as if pricked with a needle, each sprang to attention. Heads were high, eyes staring, ears pricked, impatient feet dancing, as the men mounted. They knew! The men had no more than hit the saddles when those two horses had

stretched out to it, tails horizontal, manes flying, pecking at the bits, playing with the reins as they juggled with life in that death and darkness.

As Brindle joined the cattle, they may have sensed the wild strain in him, and their spirits may have responded to it. There was no doubt about Brindle's action: that strain rejoiced and took possession of his body. All in one action he had lifted his head, looked, snorted, and was a galloping streak that lumbered with its own weight, that shook the ground as hooves hit home. In that split second he picked up the wisdom of a thousand times generations: he knew what to do in a rush. He took weights cunningly on his shoulder; he leaned against those who would jostle him for position so that he would not be unbalanced; he brushed lighter stuff aside.

The mad mob raced on, heads down, horns cracking as they bumped, hooves thundering, controlled only by one purpose: to keep going at top speed. They hit a clump of gidyea, and the breaking boughs and rattle of spurned gibbers under their hooves added yet another sound to the devilish medley. They splashed into a ghilgai, and the spray from their hooves left it dry when they had passed—all mud and squirming tadpoles that an instant before had been swimming in three-inch-deep water. And they left something else behind at that ghilgai. A leading bullock, galloping recklessly, had had his feet plucked from under him when he reached the clinging mud. He stumbled, and had no time to regain his feet. When the mob passed over

him they left a mangled body on the ground, with flesh torn to ribbons. . . .

Dancer had outdistanced her slower mates, taking the position in which danger confronted every stride. On the lead of that mob of galloping beasts, she bore in on them, shouldering recalcitrants over, her rider adding to the tumult with the cracks of his whip. Dancer knew! She took time to peck at the bit and toss her head, reveling in that dance of death.

A big beast struck out from the mob, seemingly steering for the dark line on the horizon, the edge of the desert. Dancer swung in on him. She took him scientifically, on the shoulder, with her chest hard up against him, her head over his wither. She understood that a shouldered beast might prop and stab. Holding her quarry in that position Dancer would shoot past before those slashing horns could touch her. Though she may have realized that her weight was trifling compared with the ponderous thing opposed to her, she had science on her side.

But Dancer and her rider could not calculate the lightning swiftness of the beast they were opposing. He propped, spun on his feet, swung his swords of horns. The first horn swung by, flashing even in the darkness and missing Dancer by inches.

A streak of sizzling lightning flared across the sky, lighting up the scene with camerallike distinctness. It showed a massive brindle bull fiendish in his fury, with strings of saliva draping him, with eyes which flared like coals; and a gallant mare with a horn impaled be-

neath her flank, with her blood squirting into the face of the bull with brindle markings; and her rider's face horrified as he took in the situation. Then the shutter clicked down, and darkness fell again. A stricken mare's squeal of anguish rang out, there was a burst of thunder, and the mob passed on.

Ted picked himself up from the ground, spat dirt and pebbles from his mouth, turned to look at Dancer. He cursed, calling down eternal torment on the beast responsible for her death.

Brindle lumbered on towards the desert. In the distance the rush died down. He heard whips cracking and men shouting. The cattle were in hand again.

But Brindle had tasted blood, had met and defeated man himself in fair combat. He was mad with excitement, hot with the feeling of power; invincibility was sweet! Now he did not pause: he knew where Old Rowdy ran with his mob, and he wanted possession of that mob above every other thing on earth. He, Brindle, was a king; he would prove his kingship. He licked the blood that trickled down his cheeks, roared his triumph and his challenge.

Brindle reached Old Rowdy's mob just as the eastern sky was paling. He stood off and bellowed defiance; he twined one of his horns in a coongaberry bush and pulled it up by the roots, shook his head and sent dirt and plant spraying over his back; he dropped on one knee and raked a horn on the earth; he went down on both knees and rubbed his brisket and neck on the ground; he pawed the dust till streams of it billowed

in the air over his shoulders. And every one of these things was a challenge to an opponent—to Old Rowdy—to come out and fight to the death.

Old Rowdy's eyes glared and grew redder as each insult was flung at him. He rumbled deep down in his throat, and his body swelled as he tensed himself for battle. He knew. In his own mind, perhaps, he thought that this vainglorious young upstart could not teach him anything about challenges and duels. He had beaten him before; he would this time drive home the lesson. Old Rowdy advanced, accepting the challenge.

Old Rowdy roared his bellow, and, as he raked a horn in the dirt, the weak morning light caught it and threw glancing rays from the polished surface. Then he stood still, swelled himself, blew a gust that raised spouts of dust from the earth. He was ready. Though he was supremely confident, he may have realized that this was no stripling boy who opposed him, for Brindle had put on from three to five hundred pounds since their last meeting. But, though Brindle might outweigh an elephant Old Rowdy was a king, prepared to defend for his kingly prestige!

The two bulls turned their bodies side-on to each other, though their heads faced directly one to the other; they arched their loins and jammed their tails tight between their buttocks; they swelled with deep-drawn breaths; they walked with proppy steps, balanced on the tiptoe of action as they sidled round in slow circles; their necks bulged with mighty muscles, with sinews that rippled under the skin; they drew

their breaths in short, panting gasps while their lolling tongues brushed the dust; and their eyes reddened as they sparred for an opening.

They met in a blurred flash of action as two giant bodies locked horns and pushed; they shoved and strained with heads low, briskets on the ground, as each strove to get under the other's guard—under to tip and thrust, under to lift and throw.

The cows gathered round in an interested circle, and one young calf blundered into the arena. Nosing Brindle's flank, it butted uncertainly, diverting his attention for a moment—and in that moment Old Rowdy slipped Brindle's guard and got under his horns, and Brindle was thrown backwards as Old Rowdy lifted him from the ground with a horn locked between his brisket and his front leg.

The cows bellowed their delight at the spectacle. In their excitement they capered and bucked, and one blindly bumped against the younger bull, who was struggling to recover his balance. This was too much for Brindle. Old Rowdy pressed home still further, driving Brindle back on legs that stumbled as they sought to gain a footing. He disengaged and, like a flash, lunged forward to finish the fight.

Old Rowdy's moved fast—but he was slow compared with Brindle: the young bull felt the disengagement, knew what it portended, and had his horns in position to fend off Old Rowdy's thrust. As he took the weight added by the impetus of that drive, he staggered, his hind legs crumpled beneath him.

Brindle was only a young bull mad with the heat of passion. He desired that mob of cows; he wanted to rule as king of the brumbies; but he had a grain of the sense expressed in the first natural law: self-preservation. He had been foolish to fight while he was still distressed from the rush; the other fellow had longer experience and greater weight. Now he came to the conclusion that perhaps other mobs of cows were just as sweet as this one. . . .

One second, Brindle had been battling lustily; in the next, he had spun on himself and was galloping madly, blindly, outpacing the slower death with horns which pursued him from behind. Roaring his anger and mortification, his loins arched, his head high, his cheeks belled, he sobbed his distress in long-drawn yells of hate and chagrin. He rushed blindly over a coongaberry, crash into a bloodwood sapling, and the plants bent before him and lay on the ground. He turned once to rake up the dust, to bellow his hate and defiance, and then he vanished from view to hide himself in the timber of the desert.

Old Rowdy sniffed the air, whetted a horn on the ground, looked about him, and walked back to his cows.

13. *Bred in the Bone*

WITHOUT QUESTION, CHINDERAH WAS THE BEST BOY on the station—about twenty-five years old, supple, active mentally and physically, and brought up from a youngster in the ways of the whites. If there was one boy on the place who could reason as the whites did, and reckon as they computed, that boy was Chinderah. He could speak and think excellent English, and it was only custom that made him use the pidgin of the camps.

Nellie, Chinderah's gin, just past eighteen, was even more civilized. As the blacks in the camp said of her, opening their eyes wide and whispering in awe: "Him wear t'sockin's." The gin who donned hosiery was in an advanced stage of civilization! Her mother had been a domestic—a house gin—and Nellie had been reared among whites.

To Leonard and his wife, the mating of Chinderah and Nellie had seemed an ideal match. When Chinderah had signified that he wanted Nellie—"Benjiman belong-it me,"—a room in an old hut had been given to them and neither frequented the blacks' camps on the river.

But the mating upset the old-men of the tribe, since they had not been consulted; also, to a certain extent it flouted custom. In a general way, and very broadly,

the old-men took the young gins as these reached puberty; the old gins whom they cast off were taken by the bucks reaching manhood. Thus, guided only by lewdness, they were obeying a sound fundamental law of eugenics: Old mates with young; young mates with old.

As further testimony to Chinderah's trustworthiness he was allowed to break a State law: he owned a .32 rifle. Next to Nellie, perhaps, Chinderah valued that rifle above all his other possessions. That he owned it, and was allowed to keep it, gave him a certain standing among the blacks, marked him out as of exceptional worth.

Early in the year, during a break in the wet season, Chinderah approached the manager. "Me an' Nellie want go walk-about, Mr. Leonard," he said.

"Eh!" Leonard gasped, taken by surprise. "I thought you and Nellie were past that sort of thing!"

"Me an' Nellie been feel 'im."

Leonard's thoughts raced. He knew that when the urge came to an aboriginal it was useless to try to stem it—as well try to dam the river with a spoonful of salt. It was a primeval urge, a desire to get back to nature, a call of the wild that had to be obeyed.

"We'll be back before th' brandin' muster starts," Chinderah promised.

Leonard explained it all to his wife, who protested strongly against Nellie's being allowed to go. "I don't mind her having a holiday, George; but I hate the

idea of her going out in the bush. Nellie's been reared under civilized conditions all her life."

Leonard saw Chinderah next morning, went to him as he was sitting outside his hut cleaning his rifle.

"Mrs. Leonard say you look-out belong-it Nellie, Chinderah. Which way you go?"

Chinderah did not reply.

"Which way?"

"I dunno," Chinderah replied evasively.

"You're not going out to the Toko, to that tribe out there, are you?"

"I don't want go tha' way. Somethin' inside belly belong-it me say I got to go tha' way."

"If you do, you look out those old-men don't get Nellie."

Chinderah laughed. He snapped the lever of his rifle, peered down the barrel, clicked it shut, put the weapon to his shoulder, and aimed at nothing. Then he laughed again. "I'm not frighten' belong-it th' old-man."

The two left the station. They had not crossed the outside channel of the river before a thin pencil of smoke rose twisting in the air from the old blacks' camp near the station. Chinderah saw it and laughed uneasily. Later in the day an answering spiral rose from the west, from the Toko Ranges—and Chinderah felt a void at the pit of his stomach.

When they had crossed the outside channel of the river on the far side, the holiday spirit seized them: they doffed all their clothes and placed them in a hol-

low tree; they buried, too, the edible delicacies that Mrs. Leonard had insisted Nellie take with her—they did not want “tucker belong-it white man” when on a holiday. Now, garbed only in a string about the middle, from which a bit of calico hung, they strode on in delight.

Chinderah had his bandoleer of bullets slung around his shoulder; he carried the rifle in one hand; the other grasped two spears that he had borrowed from old Moonta, at the station camp. He walked ahead—he was the hunter, warrior, provider. Nellie, as befitted her sex, walked behind, carrying necessities in a small bag which hung behind her shoulders, suspended from a band that crossed her forehead.

The feet of both were tender, since at work they were boot-wearers, and they picked their way carefully; they knew that their feet would harden in a day or two. All of Nellie’s life had been that in which the man shows consideration for the woman, but she did not complain over being made a beast of burden, assigned the position of the inferior sex—indeed she seemed to revel in it.

They were crossing some high downs a few miles out from the river, outwardly silent though doubtless chattering with cheerful happiness inwardly, when a plain turkey rose almost from under their feet, leaving a couple of green-and-brown-mottled eggs on the ground. At home, on the station, neither would have dreamed of touching a tainted egg or one even slightly incubated. This was different: this a gift from the gods.

There was a full ghilgai some little distance away that would serve them as a night-camp. The clump of gidyeas near the ghilgai would give them fuel to ward off mosquitoes with smoke, and also to entrap that plain turkey. The eggs alone would be good; the turkey added to them would be better.

After making a fire Chinderah selected a dozen or more coals of gidyea, each as big as his shut fist. He knew gidyea would burn to an ash, right to the core. He carried the coals on a coolamon and distributed them about the turkey's nest, a yard or so out from it in a circle. Then he went back to the ghilgai, where Nellie was setting up housekeeping—making small fires and clearing gibbers from the patch of ground on which they would sleep.

The turkey returned. She went warily to her nest, dropping to the ground and slinking through the grass for the last dozen or more feet so that none might note her approach. She saw those coals coated with white ash strewn about her nest. A tidy housekeeper, unwilling to have any foreign ornaments about her nest, she swept one with her wing—and in sweeping it she knocked all the white ash off, exposing the red coal beneath. She continued to sweep till the area was clear, till the coals were hidden in the surrounding grass. Then, satisfied, she went to her nest.

She had no more than settled herself when she rose again as she felt the ground vibrations of a man's approaching footsteps. She slunk along, her head and neck parallel with the ground, till she was a safe dis-

tance from the nest. She stood erect, ran as the man came towards her, and spread her wings to take to the air and fly as he followed her.

She bounded in the air, beat with her wings, flopped heavily to the ground. She could not fly! Her wings had been singed and her flight feathers burned when she had swept those coals from her nest.

Chinderah and Nellie dined sumptuously that night, their gleaming teeth sparkling as they laughed with joy. They had roasted eggs for a start; grilled goanna for an entree; grilled turkey for a roast. Life was good, and, even if the soles of their feet were a little tender from the unaccustomed walking, the holiday was great fun.

The next afternoon, at the edge of the desert country, they met Brindle. The bull, after being ousted by Old Rowdy, had made south, facing the wind to keep the flies from his eyes and other tender spots. He was discontented, bad-tempered, irritable enough to fight his own shadow. He stood and looked at the two native blacks, and he shook his head and snorted his anger as he watched them. He fell in behind them after they had passed and, with his head low, sniffing the ground as he went, he ran their tracks as surely as a dog would do.

Chinderah knew Brindle, having heard of his last exploit in the rush. The management would be glad to have Brindle shot, and his natural lust to kill relished the prospect. He sat down and waited till Brindle was within a hundred yards of him.



He waited till Brindle was within a hundred yards.

Brindle stood and surveyed the strange sight of a sitting man looking earnestly at him, pointing a stick with a hole in it straight at his forehead. It was embarrassing: Brindle snorted and shook his head to express his condemnation of the proceedings.

Coincident with that shake, Brindle saw a flash of light leap from the hollow stick, heard a smacking report like thunder, was smashed back on his haunches by the weight of an avalanche that hit him on the head. His senses may have been one big maelstrom of confusion as he staggered on his hocks, but his impulse was to leap forward, and he did. He plunged and landed on his knees, stumbled and raked his horn on the ground. A mighty bellow broke from him as the shock of that impact took him, and he bounced again, to land on his four feet. He was racked with pain, stunned with agony, blind with confusion. The blood poured down his cheek from a bullet-hole clean through the base of one horn, and, as it reached his mouth and nostrils, he went fighting mad: he bucked, raked the ground with his good horn, bellowed agony and hate.

Chinderah did not want to waste another of his precious bullets on the bull, which he was sure was mortally wounded. He and Nellie laughed at the antics of that mammoth as it strove to get away from the tearing pain that bit it, at the free circus it supplied as it challenged monsters of the air and fought imaginary antagonists. They laughed till their sides ached, till the tears ran down their cheeks, as Brindle, his head

high, his loins arched, trotted blindly away from them, sobbing his shame and pain.

Chinderah and Nellie continued their walkabout. Each of them knew where they were going, and each knew that the other knew, though neither mentioned it by word or expressed it by sign. They knew it to be as futile to resist the desire to go to their goal as it was impossible to fight the urge to "go walkabout."

About a week after leaving the station they walked up a gorge in the hills to where their instinct told them the camp of Toko blacks was situated. High in the air, pinned in space on motionless wings, kite hawks swung, denoting possible scraps and scavenger below—which meant that men were camped there. Chinderah, as was the right of his sex, strode in front, a half kangaroo over one shoulder, his rifle and spears in his hand. Nellie, as befitted her inferior sex, followed behind, carrying the other half of the carcass as well as the bag that hung between her shoulders.

They were uneasy—more, they were afraid with the unknown fear of one who goes before a god. Chinderah attempted an air of bravado and, as the camp dogs came barking towards him, he dropped on one knee and, with a shot from his rifle, knocked a crow from a bare branch some fifty yards distant. He felt slightly better after that, and braced himself, while his gin copied his manner and walked more erect.

The camp expected them. Moreover, Chinderah and Nellie knew they were expected. They handed over the kangaroo to serve its purpose in the feast of welcome,

and joined in the camp doings—though Nellie, halting in her aboriginal speech, was silent among the old gins who clamored about her.

They feasted that night from the kangaroo, little more than outwardly charred by the coals. Chinderah took his place in the circle of men, with the gins, dogs, and pickaninnies outside him, and, when he had gnawed a bone, he tossed it negligently over his shoulders for the gins and dogs to fight for, as casually as if he had never in his life handed Nellie her meals on a plate.

There was a corroboree that night. The two station blacks occupied the seats of honor, in the circle of little fires that lighted the performance. They gloried in the native dances, in the posturing and prancing, the amusement which was next to their souls and to which their minds were attuned. They slapped hands on bare thighs in time to the music they chanted, and laughed at witticisms that none but a black could enjoy. But Chinderah kept his rifle across his knees, and he never took one hand from it!

The corroboree stopped suddenly. An old man, Mookai, his eyes red-rimmed, his flesh hanging in loose folds, gaunt, evil, and repulsive, rose from the place where he had been sitting and went over to Chinderah. He advanced slowly, weaving as he came, his eyes never leaving the pair who were seated before him.

Nellie gave a little gasp of fear and grasped at Chinderah's arm. Chinderah was frankly frightened. He had a double mission, and a dual load of fear: his own life, and the welfare of his gin. He tried to lift the

rifle, and his arms moved as though swathed in pillows, with the ghastly action of a nightmare. Trembling he made no effort to resist when Mookai touched him on the shoulder. He rose to his feet aimlessly and, stumblingly, unwillingly, was led away by Mookai. As he left the circle he heard Nellie's scream of fear and pain, but he was unable to stop in his walk or lift a hand to help her! She screamed again, and Chinderah walked blindly on, unseeing, helpless, under a stronger control than his own.

It was a fortnight or more later when old Monkey, a gin from the camp on the river, told Leonard that Chinderah and Nellie had returned. He caught a horse, saddled it, and cantered down to the camp. Chinderah came to meet him—a shamefaced Chinderah, a haggard boy, a man who had known great agony of spirit and flesh.

"Where's Nellie?" Leonard snapped, guessing what had happened.

Chinderah nodded dumbly towards the camp.

"Which way you been go?"

"Belong-it Toko."

"Why th' hell did you go there?" Leonard demanded harshly. "I told you not to go there. Why'd you go?"

"Couldn' help him, Mr. Leonard," Chinderah replied pitifully. "I didn' wan' go. Somethin' inside me been make him go."

"You're sick now, are you?"

"Uh-huh."

"Him been whistle belong-it you?"

Chinderah hung his head.

"That means they have. What about Nellie? That one been mulcurry belong-it him?"

Chinderah replied by laying his head on the horse's mane and sobbing like a child.

"Sufferin' hell!" Leonard exploded. "They should be shot! Still, I suppose it's their own law and custom. Why the devil did you ever want to go out on the Mulligan? Where's Nellie now? Send her up to the house. Why didn't you bring her there as soon as you came back?"

"Him too much t'shame," Chinderah replied.

"Why didn't you protect Nellie? You had a rifle—why didn't you use it?"

"Couldn' do nothin', Boss," the boy replied meekly. "When them ol'-man put him hand belong-it him, then can' do nothin'. Him go like-it jelly. Tha' one say you got to go, then th' boy follow him. Can't do nothin'."

"Where's your rifle?"

"That-one ol'-man been take it. Can' do nothin'. Him been take it. I can' stop him. Boy can' do nothin'."

Leonard sought Nellie—and found her a haggard old woman who had been a bright-faced laughing girl. Her shoulders were bent, her face lined, and she who had been so particular about cleanliness was coated with grime and filth. She was depressed and listless, seeming without life. Leonard rode back to the station.

Within a week Nellie's spirit followed that of the still-born baby to which she had prematurely given

birth. The blacks shifted camp as was their custom after a death had occurred in it.

Chinderah was distraught. Love, as the whites knew it, did not enter into his vocabulary. He was a wild thing, an animal, and he had been robbed of his mate—more than that: of his young, too. He did not wail his sorrow, nor fling himself on the ground and throw up dust; he sought no spoken solace from others. Chinderah was an animal in whom observance of the first natural law was paramount: self-preservation. He was also an animal, and civilized enough to appreciate the beauty of the first impulse: retaliation.

He nursed his wrongs, and, silently and alone, that mutilated and stricken boy set himself to redress them.

Chinderah remained apart from the other blacks as much as possible. He realized that he had first of all to regain his health and strength. Though nursing a sorrow embittered by the desire for revenge, he took care of himself. About midway through March, when preparations were being made to prepare the stock-camp for the first branding muster of the year, he sought the head stockman.

"You tell-it th' boss, Tom, I'll be right belong-it brandin' muster."

"Sure you'll be fit, Chinderah?"

The boy replied by picking up two gibbers. He tossed one about fifty feet in the air; as it was falling he threw the other. The second stone hit that difficult falling target with a precision that was a delight, with a crack that bespoke perfect aim. Chinderah laughed and with

the action and sound of a sprung trap, snapped his teeth on a bit of light leather he held. Then he passed it over to Tom for examination. It had a piece bitten clean out of it.

"You think-it I'll be right?" he asked.

Leaving Tom, he went down to the old blacks' camp on the river, walking with a definite purpose. When old Moonta saw him swing into the camp with his shoulders braced, the old-boy sat still and silent. Chinderah walked straight to Moonta, grabbed the scraggy whiskers in his fingers, and shook the old head till its jaws rattled. To old Monkey's indignant surprise he swept her aside and picked up Colonel, another old-man. He lifted that squirming body across his knee and spanked hard where it would do most good, laughing aloud with joy as the impotent old-man sobbed at the insult.

Now Chinderah was free of the power of the old-men, and he knew it—he had proved it. In his new-found power he turned about and wrecked that camp: broke spears, smashed coolamons, tore down gunyahs. Then he left the camp, striding like a young giant in his strength. He turned once and flung a taunt at the old-men: "I'll get-it th' new rifle by-'m-by. Then I'll go out belong-it Toko an' see ol' Mookai an' that other feller."

Later in the day a spiral of smoke rose from the camp on the river; before sundown its twin showed in the western sky.

"Tha's nothin'," Chinderah boasted gloatingly. "Them ol'-men can' do nothin' to me now."

On the eve of the camp's leaving the station, Tom reported to the manager: "That Chinderah's sick, Mr. Leonard. We won't be able to take him out this muster."

"What's wrong, Tom?"

"I dunno. He seems half dead, don't take no interest in nothin', an' on'y wants to be left alone."

Leonard saw the sick boy. His pulse was even, his temperature normal, all other symptoms were regular.

"What's the matter, Chinderah? You're not frightened belong-it that old-man, are you?"

"Him been bone me an' sing him," Chinderah whispered.

"Rot!" Leonard snapped. "You don't believe in that rubbish, do you? That sort of stuff's only good for myalls, not for boys like you."

"Suppose-it on'y one ol'-man been point-it th' bone, tha's all right. But altogether all th' ol'-boys belong Toko been point him. They been sing me, too! Th' boy must die when all them ol'-men point th' bone an' sing him."

"Rot! You belted Moonta and Colonel, and they couldn't hurt you. Who told you they boned you?"

"Ol' Monkey been tell me. She say th' ol'-man say I got to die nex' Tuesday."

Leonard got busy. He explained the position to his wife:

"You can't do any good, Minnie. You stay out of

this. Your sympathy, well-meant though it might be, would only upset the boy further."

"At least you'll send for a doctor, George?"

"What sort of doctor? It's a psychologist, not a saw-bones, that we want in this case. There's nothing a doctor can do. I'm the best doctor the boy can have, because he has faith in me. There's not a doctor within a hundred and fifty miles of here—you know that. Would a doctor, anyhow, come to a black-boy who imagines he's been made sick by having the bone pointed at him? Even if he wanted to come, he couldn't leave his other patients for the time needed for the trip."

"What can we do?"

"I've notified the Deputy-Administrator, and he may hand on the information to headquarters."

"*They* might do something, George."

"They dare not."

"Why?"

"They'd fall foul of the Civil Service Union, which would immediately declare them black because they take an interest in their work."

"George, this is no time for cheap cynicism!"

"I know it isn't. That's why I'm relying on myself and not on the Administrator. I have work to do."

First he administered a purgative which, in his own words, "would have bust a camp-oven." Then, induced by threat of punishment, old Moonta came trembling to Chinderah's bed.

"Moonta's going to fix you, Chinderah," Leonard

said cheerfully. "He's going to get those debbil-debbils out from inside you."

Moonta labored earnestly, with the manager's eye on him. From under the blanket he drew a squirming carney lizard and held it aloft with a shout of joy. He bared Chinderah's stomach and sucked hard with pursed lips, and pommeled till the sweat stood out on his forehead. Then he turned and spat something on the floor.

"Tha's him!" he exclaimed exultantly, holding up a lump of kopai.

Chinderah grunted, turned languidly, and spoke: "Tha's not him, Mr. Leonard. Tha's on'y playabout belong-it myall. Tha' ol'-man altogether been sing me, an' I can't beat him."

Leonard rode down to the camp to see old Monkey, the gin. He threatened her with punishment in this life and torture in the hereafter. When he had her sufficiently terrified, she tearfully promised to do his bidding: She would go straight up and tell Chinderah that the message she gave him about the bone was a fake.

Leonard immediately mounted his horse, left Monkey to compose herself, and cantered back to Chinderah.

"Ol' Monkey didn't tell-it me tha' one 'bout th' bone," the boy murmured. "She got to do it. She can't help herself. Th' ol'-man belong-it Toko make her do it. She didn' tell no lie. She didn' wan' tell me: she had to do it."

"This is a bit too deep for me," Leonard muttered to himself. "No one could possibly know I was going

to threaten Monkey. No one could possibly have come from her to here ahead of me. Yet this boy knows all about my conversation with her! I wish the Administrator of Aboriginal Affairs were here. Tomorrow's Tuesday—if he's going to do anything he'd better move lively. I've done all I can do."

And on the morrow, at the appointed time on Tuesday, Chinderah turned his face to the wall and obeyed the orders of the old-men on the Toko, while smoke rose from the camp on the river—rose and billowed—till an answering smudge in the west told that the old-men acknowledged the message.

14. *The Pituri Harvest*

AFTER HAVING HAD HIS HORN DRILLED BY A .32 BULLET, Brindle went mad. The pain was so excruciating that he was practically blind with agony: he would stumble over bushes he could not see; he would run into bigger trees that brought him up abruptly; he would stand in one place, bellowing his anguish and turning endlessly in the effort to get away from the pain.

That sound of a bull in trouble brought another to the spot, ready to assist in an enemy's obsequies and even, if need be, to lend a hand or a horn to hasten that end. He saw Brindle, measured his size, gauged his sweeping sabers of horns, took note of his injuries, and considered the prospects good. He raked up the dirt and bellowed his challenge.

Brindle never hesitated: he was mad enough to fight a specter or gore a ghost. He went gladly to the attack. He paused only once to rake dust; then turned side-on, and snapped into battle with his head down and his horns advanced.

But at once he sprang back so suddenly that the opposing bull was left groping the air. Brindle gave a bellow of pain as sharp as an explosion; he was a beaten and retreating bull even before the fight had started!

For that crash of engaging horns had sent ten thousand nerves jangling in Brindle's body, had stunned him with agony, had sent him reeling backwards.

The other bull watched him go, too astounded to follow. Brindle went blindly, with his head on one side, with his loins arched, running into shrubs and bushes in his path without seeing them. He turned and went back to the mixed mob which had followed him to the combat.

Brindle's pain eased within twenty-four hours. By daylight next morning his horn felt as good as new, with no ache at all. To celebrate the occasion he went to a mob of cattle he saw in the distance and challenged a bull for the right of the herd. He raked up the dust, bellowed, dropped on one knee, and raked a horn along the ground—the horn that unfortunately was the wounded one.

The other bull was no fool: as soon as he saw his opponent temporarily disabled and blind to all about him, he took advantage of the situation: he drove home his charge. Brindle was lifted from the ground as two stubby horns raised red ribbons on his side and two streaks of hair flew in the wind. This brought him to his senses, the lesser pain lost in the greater danger: he spun on himself and fled—raced with that startling suddenness peculiar to a beaten bull, putting distance between himself and his antagonist.

Brindle faded a little in condition. But it was the top of the season, cows were amorous, bulls eager; and the ceaseless urge of desire drove him to gratification.

He had many fights, some of them broken off even before they began, when Brindle threshed a tree with his horns to denote his powers, others when the first shock of engaging horns let him know his infirmity. Presently he seemed to realize that he was in no fit state to press his claims; he became a stealer, a night wanderer, a lone bull who stalked alone. He was battle-worn, with great scars running in parallel streaks on his hide, with loose skin flapping from him as he faded in condition, and with a fiendish temper. He left the main run of the cattle, worked down the river and out from it to the edge of the sandhill country. He stayed there a few months, gained gloriously in condition, but, morose and miserable, still ran alone.

It was at about this time that Waukaby, who was horse-tailer, off-sider, and assistant to the teamster, approached Leonard during a slack period of work: "Me an' Frosty want-it go get him pituri, Marmy."

In his younger days, Waukaby had been attached to the Native Mounted Police. He was rather prone to spring to attention and to address his superior with that semimilitary title. Frosty was a middle-aged boy, too lazy to be of use in the stock-camp, too indolent and fat to work about the station.

"How long you be away?"

"Might-it 'bout three week: when new moon him been come-up."

"Righto, Waukaby. You made a valiant effort to compute time as we know it; but the new moon is due in about ten days. It might do Frosty good to get a

bit of sweat out of him, even though winter is just round the corner."

Waukaby and Frost started on their pituri harvest. They did not, as their forefathers had done, take their water in kangaroo skins: the station gave them four canvas water-bags, each holding about six quarts.

"That ought to do 'em," Leonard told the book-keeper. "They can leave a couple of full ones at their depot. The other two will do them for their dash to pituri and return to the depot."

Neither of the boys believed in unnecessary walking. They considered the matter, and, without discussing it verbally, reached the same plan: they would each take two bags, one in either hand, leave two at the depot—the two they had not used on the road—and take the other two out to the pituri. It was about fifty miles to the pituri, most of it heavy walking in fairly loose sand, and a depot about thirty miles out from the river would suit admirably.

The boys started, each carrying over his shoulder a sugar-bag holding food, and with a full water-bag in each hand. Those empty sugar-bags would serve later to hold the gathered pituri. The conditions seemed excellent. Waukaby had in his mind a clump of straggling bloodwoods at the foot of a sandhill which would serve as a depot. Though neither boy spoke of it, and though Frosty was duller of wit than most boys, each knew exactly where they were going and the procedure to be followed.

It was thirty miles out to those bloodwoods from the

point at which they left the river. There were no landmarks, no guides, and it was country unfamiliar to the boys. No cattle ran down in that area, and it was seldom worked. Indeed, it was almost as devoid of indications as the open sea.

But the boys did not hesitate. They went with all the certainty of men following a marked line or a city street. They did not bother over leads any more than a migrating bird would. They went as surely as a flock pigeon returns to her nest, one among millions, in thousands of square miles of country. Waukaby fixed his mind on that sparse clump of bloodwoods, drew a mental picture of them, set his brain compass on that point, and never deviated. Perhaps if he had hesitated, argued with himself, doubted his ability, he would have swerved. But he knew where he was going, and he went in that direction.

About twenty miles out from the river, in the sand-hill country, the boys came upon a solitary bull track. Waukaby, who could identify tracks infallibly, looked once and grunted: "Tha' one Brindle."

They passed the bull a mile or more farther on. He was standing about half a mile off their route, alone; and, when he saw the two boys trudging in the distance, he shook his head and snorted his anger.

Waukaby gave one glance at the bull, and in that camera-click read all the bull's recent history: his recovery from his wound, his fights, his defeats, his desire to be alone till fully recovered. He gave the animal

no second look, but trudged steadily on towards the clump of bloodwoods.

The boys camped the night at the bloodwoods. Examining the bags carefully next morning, they picked the two they considered the best, filled them from the other bags till they overflowed, and left them hanging on two broken boughs. The bags were securely corked against ants, and the boughs protected them from the sun. The boys took no chances, knowing that their lives depended upon those bags on their home tracks.

Early next morning, more lightly loaded, they traveled to the pituri grounds, reaching them a little after midday. A sudden snap in the weather had brought an unusual and summer heat, and they drank deeper than they had expected to. Even at that, however, they were safe. The shrubs were plentiful; the season good; the picking would be easy and comparatively fast. They planned to gather until tomorrow night. This, they estimated, would leave them with empty water-bags, a great thirst, full loads of pituri, and the cool night in which to walk to the depot, where they were assured of water. After that, the trip back to the river would be almost a routine job. Waukaby felt like complimenting himself upon his ability to organize tours.

The boys did as they had planned: they gathered till about sundown; had a last drink from their water-bags; shouldered their light loads of full bags of pituri, and struck out direct for the bloodwoods.

The sun was peeping over the edge when the blood-

woods came in view. The boys were thirsty: their tongues were swollen, their lips dry and caked, their skins baked to the cracking point from the dry fires that seemed to rage inside them. But they stepped more briskly as they approached the bloodwoods.

Both boys stood aghast when they reached the bloodwoods. They were not given to unnecessary speech, and neither said a word. The bags of pituri fell from their shoulders to the ground as the boys stepped forward uncertainly, hoping it was just a bad dream, to view the situation.

From the marks on the ground, Waukaby the tracker read the picture as quickly and easily as the Cinemagoer interprets what he sees on the screen. Again he identified Brindle's tracks, saw where the bull had followed their own tracks, had walked about their bloodwoods camp, had probed with his horn among the foliage, and doubtless sniffed as he probed. As vividly as though the scene were being enacted before him, Waukaby could tell where Brindle, in a fit of wanton mischief, had hooked each water-bag with his horn, ripped it open, and let the precious water spill on the sand! He saw where the bull had lain down, chewed the cud as he lay, and then had risen to his feet and casually sauntered away in the direction of the river.

Neither boy said a word. Each, without comment, picked up his bag of pituri, tied it to a bough of the tree, left it hanging there. It might not be a total loss: some other boy, hunting for their bodies, might find the pituri that it had cost them their lives to get.

Waukaby, as the master mind, considered the matter. It was thirty miles to the river and water; the day was likely to be reasonably cool; if they spelled there under the trees for the day, they would be that much fresher and have the cooler night in which to do their traveling. But also, if they stayed there for the day, they would be that much thirstier and weaker for their trip, apart from the possibility of increasing heat. He made his choice, and Frosty, without a word being spoken, agreed with it. They would rest for a few hours, be guided by the temperature conditions, and, when slightly recovered, make a dash for the river and water—for water and life!

It was about midway through the morning when the two boys started their long walk over heavy ground. Neither spoke a word; there was no unnecessary action or wasted effort. A white man with a quicker imagination might have been appalled by the immensity of the task ahead and thus have handicapped himself with a load of fear. But the boys can hardly have drawn on their imaginations to that extent: animal like, they had only one object in view—the distant river and water.

The sun climbed almost directly overhead, and they trod on their own shadows. High in the sky two objects that had been mere specks in the distance lowered sufficiently to be identified as eagle-hawks, scavengers always on the lookout for a meal. A few crows, with that foreknowledge of death that is part of their breeding, flew with them from tree to tree, going on ahead and waiting till the boys drew level. They trudged on, their

feet dragging in the sand and raising small ribbons of dust behind them. Their tongues were swollen, protruding between parted teeth; their eyes were blood-shot, their skins harsh and brittle; their lips had split in red slits; worst of all, the soles of their feet had cracked, which made them tender.

Midway through the afternoon Waukaby suddenly realized that Frosty was no longer following him. Dully he recalled having heard him shuffling behind, not more than a mile or so back. Indifferent, only idly curious, he turned to see where Frosty had fallen. He could not see him; he knew the boy might be less than a hundred yards distant, hidden behind a spinifex clump—or he might be a full mile in the rear. But he was not really interested, having only contempt for a weakling who could fall by the way.

As Waukaby turned to continue his march, he saw a wallaroo come out from beneath a clump of spinifex. The 'roo looked about, sniffed the air, dabbed its forearms with its tongue, and hopped away—strong and healthy, full and content.

It is doubtful whether Waukaby reasoned, whether he reached his conclusion by a process of deduction. For he did not need to employ the white man's methods to come to that conclusion: he knew. He had noted that the 'roo was full; he realized that it was too far from the river to have got its water from there; and he remembered that Brindle was also a long way out, yet had been healthy, vigorous, and full. There was only

one explanation: those animals must have water nearer at hand than the river!

The boy did not waste time looking for signs of water, or following leads. His instinct told him where to go. He walked over to a likely clump of spinifex, searched under it, groping with his hands, and only grunted his satisfaction when he felt the triangular stem of a pulpy vine.

It was parrakylia, that desert-growth of miraculous properties. A white man would have danced in his delight at finding it. Waukaby did not even smile as he drew out a length of the vine and directed it towards his mouth in order to chew it. But he could not get it into his mouth—his tongue was so swollen, protruding through his cracked lips, that it was impossible for him to open his mouth. So he tilted his head back, squeezed the vine, and the drops of liquid that fell landed on his tongue. That acted! Just as dry ground responds to rain, the tongue quickly subsided. Now he could stuff the vine into his mouth and chew. The liquid was sweet, a little acid, decidedly slimy—and the loveliest thing he had ever tasted. It was nectar itself!

Waukaby now walked back and found Frosty lying on his tracks. The other boy was groaning, with flies clustering about his eyes, and ants swarming over his lips. Waukaby brushed the insects aside and squeezed some drops of the fluid onto Frosty's tongue, reviving him exactly as he had revived himself.

That parrakylia, though it only took the edge off their thirst, had saved their lives. They proceeded to

chew the vine, ravenously, swallowing the liquid and spitting fibers on the ground. They knew that parrakylia grew in that area only in odd years and under certain conditions of the season, and that the chances of their being saved by finding it had been about one in a thousand. But neither of them regarded it as a miracle or a special dispensation of Providence. It just happened because it did.

Waukaby broke off more parrakylia and rubbed his body with its juicy stems. He applied it till he dripped, his arid skin sucking up the moisture like blotting paper. Frosty did the same. Then, a bit before sundown, feeling reasonably safe and perfectly sure of themselves, the two boys set out for the river.

Their feet were still tender, their legs tired; they shuffled as they walked. Their shoulders were bent, their heads hanging low, and they seemed on the point of collapse. But the eagles had risen to greater heights, sweeping a wider horizon; the crows had flown away, swishing the air with their wings and calling back harsh curses on the men who had cheated them of a feast. The birds knew that something had happened, and that it would only waste time to follow those two. . . .

15. *The Conqueror*

BRINDLE CONTINUED TO RUN ALONE, CAST OFF FROM the company of his kind by his inability to defend his rights. He was a bull, with all a bull's instincts; he had to lock horns occasionally, if only in a playful spar, just to assert his sex. But now he knew that his wound prevented this—that he would flinch the instant pressure was applied. He also knew that partial retirement would be construed as cowardice, that the other bull would press home his advantage, and that he, Brindle, would be forced to retire fast, pursued by the mocking crowd of mickeys who would taunt him, the sexless steers who would caper about him and roar derision. So Brindle stayed alone.

Winter came. Stinging winds poured over the country, bending strong trees before its might, rippling the surface of the waterholes into miniature billows, casting up spume and dirty froth on the lee banks. It was a dry wind, a clean wind, brittle in its sharpness; but it could not sap the quality of those glorious grasses of that dry land: they remained full of nutriment to give life and condition to all stock.

Brindle was a mature bull, lacking only the stolidity of years to give him that massive appearance to which his actual weight entitled him. He was, in the language

of the land, "fair bursting with condition" as he posed before the rising sun. He stood, head high, seeming to scent cattle in the distance. Then the fever of lust took him: he raked dust over his shoulders as he challenged the demons of desire; flailed a shrub with his horns; went down on his knees, rubbed his neck along the ground, sharpened each horn alternately on the earth.

Brindle could not reason, but had he been able to put two and two together he would have known that his sore horn was cured when he flailed that bush without hurt to himself. He could only remember that the last time he had met a bull in combat he had winced from the attack, had been tossed aside, and had had to flee for his life. It was an unnecessary exile that he was inflicting on himself.

The bull ceased his actions suddenly. He seemed to have made up his mind what to do. He turned and stalked deliberately in the direction of the river, where he knew other cattle ran. Perhaps, in his own way, he had come to the conclusion that an honorable death at the horns of an adversary was better than a skulking life which was little more than a living death.

It was nearing midday when he came upon his first mob of mixed cattle, with a couple of bulls running with them. Brindle did not try to hide his approach: he bellowed his challenge and raked dust when he was within half a mile of them. He approached closer, at intervals repeating his challenge.

No bull came out to meet him. It was past the middle of winter; the two bulls were aged, and their blood

was running cold. They did not want to fight just for the fun of fighting; but, when Brindle forced himself into the mob, the Law directed that the senior bull should oppose that entry. He did. He came to meet Brindle, swelling his body and lolling his tongue as he came, and bellowed his make-believe belligerency.

The bulls stopped and stared at each other. It was possible that they recognized each other. It was only a couple of months back, when the blood was running hot in the roan bull, that he had not waited for Brindle to enter the herd, and that their brief encounter had forced Brindle to flee for his life. Now he paused for a second when he saw the bull opposed to him; this in itself indicated that he recalled the recent combat. Then the urge of lust took him in its flood, and he flashed into battle.

The bulls met head-on, horns locked, bodies straining, feet scraping as they gripped at the ground beneath them. They stood for a full five seconds, held in combat, bodies arched, horns probing as they pushed. Brindle gathered himself together for an added effort, flung himself into the fight with added weight—and his opponent crumpled before him.

The roan bull was routed. He charged through the mob that had been his but a few short minutes before, scattering cows and others as he surged through them to avoid the raking horns that were lifting ribbons of hair from his buttocks as he raced.

The second of the two bulls with the mob—older, smaller, wiser than the first—did not offer fight at all.

He saw his senior routed; he took one look at the brindled mammoth in front of him; he judged discretion to be the better part of valor—and retired.

Brindle took possession of that mob. He bellowed his might as he roamed through them; he made advances to every cow that crossed his path; he ousted sexless steers which would play with him. He dived forward and pinned a flirtatious heifer with his horns. She wanted to play with him by teasing him to chase her. Brindle was in no mood for play. She picked herself up from the ground on which he had tossed her and, too nerveless to run, too fearful to escape, she stood.

Brindle would celebrate his victory still further: he twined shrubs in his horns and pulled them up by the roots; he went down on his knees, drove his horns into the ground, threw sods as big as buckets high in the air; he went to a coolibah tree, apparently with the deliberate intention of testing his weak horn, and placed his forehead against the trunk. He rubbed up and down, scaling his forehead and rasping loose bark from the tree; he increased the pressure, and the leaves on the stout tree quivered as it took the strain; he deliberately placed his wounded horn against the tree, lifted with a ripping motion as if to test it for weakness, and turned in playful ecstasy and knelt on the sheet of bark that he had stripped from it. He was satisfied: his horn could stand up to any punishment or work; his days of exile were ended!

Brindle stayed with the mob he had won. He accompanied them to the waterhole on the river. But he was

nervous and apprehensive while at water—he hated those day-drinking habits. He had his alternatives: he could resume his solitary ways, stealing by stealth at night, or he could return to the brumby mob on the edge of the desert. But Brindle remembered Old Rowdy, and he stayed.

He could not accustom himself to working the open country during the daylight hours. He repeatedly tried to induce some of his cows to go with him to the timber during the day and sneak in to the river at night. They refused. He tried to coax them: they would not be coaxed. He tried force: they resisted force by trickery—dodging him, slipping away to hide themselves among other cattle in other mobs.

By the time the bullock muster started, Brindle was becoming more or less reconciled to those open ways. He was surprised one morning, coming in towards the river, to see two men riding ahead of him on the open downs. He froze immediately, sank into invisibility by remaining motionless in the shadow of a tree. He had to resist strenuously his desire to rake up the dust and bellow a challenge to the men in the distance, and his heart pounded in great pumps as it restrained his inclination to wheel about, to gallop madly in an effort to get away.

Brindle watched the men fade towards the skyline, rounding up a mob of cattle. He remained perfectly motionless till the sound of a cracked whip came to him. This was too much for his nerves! It brought back memories; it carried with it the searing bite of the whip

as it fell; it reminded him of the devilish dogs. Most of all, perhaps, it sounded like the report of the rifle that had wounded his horn. Brindle tore off at full gallop, his lumbering weight seeming to shake the earth, his huge belly swaying as he reached in his stride. But he went. He was never within sight of the men. His flight was unnoticed. He kept going.

That experience decided Brindle: he would go back to his brumby habits, would return to the wild mob, to the ways that were bred in him. He knew the risks. He balanced the might of Old Rowdy against the dozens of smaller victories he had gained over the herd bulls on the plains. These gave him confidence. He went in a straight line, not troubling to hide his presence, and direct to where he knew the brumby mob was running.

It was dark when Brindle reached the desert timber, one of the nights on which the brumby mob did not go to drink. Brindle knew exactly where to find them: at that time of the night he would meet them on the fringe of the timbered country as they came out on the downs to feed.

When he was within a mile of them he heralded his approach; bellowing his might and raking up dust. He continued his challenges every few hundred yards until he came within sight of the cattle stringing out from the timber. Then he went into a perfect paroxysm of defiance.

He roared his bellows; he raked the dirt with his hooves and plowed it with his horns; he threshed

shrubs till they were leafless. He went to a solitary white-ants' nest, hooked his horn under it, lifted it high and threw it aside. A coating of dust covered his face, formed rings round the moisture of his eyes, made funnels through which he breathed. He may have looked ridiculous; certainly he appeared warlike. Nothing, least of all another bull, could possibly mistake his intentions.

Brindle swelled his body with deep breaths as the cows formed a large circle around him. He lowered his head, opened his mouth, lolled his tongue till it lapped the ground, and bellowed. He arched his neck, turned side-on, breathed in stertorous gusts as he poised on tiptoe, balanced perfectly, ready for immediate action. His eyes reddened till the white rims stood out in startling clearness, and he bellowed again.

Presently a cow came to him, sniffed him over, and calmly began to lick his neck in caress. That neck was tense—bulging with corded muscles, tight of skin, ready to lift any weight under which his sweeping horns could lodge themselves; but now Brindle relaxed.

Not completely, however. For there remained the possibility that had faced him before he had come: Old Rowdy might be there to give battle. So Brindle was not satisfied until he had worked through that mob backwards and forwards, had examined every individual member of it, and had called many more of his blatant challenges. When these were not taken up, he was confident that he was the king of the mob; he had

achieved his ambition; he, Brindle, was lord of the brumbies!

The remaining months of winter sped by. Brindle did not weaken, nor did his blood grow sluggish. He was a dominant lord of that mob, arrogant, masterful, and a shade cruel perhaps. But he was wise. He had learned his lessons, and instinctively fitted to make the best use of them during his reign as a brumby bull. He was massive without being unwieldy, heavy without being ponderous, strong without being muscle-bound. He could lead his mob as they threw long leagues behind them, and he could hurl a ton or more of fighting fury into combat. No cow could possibly accuse him of being neglectful in his attentions; no straying bull could ever say Brindle let him come within speaking distance.

It was part-way through October when summer's hot fingers gripped the country. The winds hushed themselves for a few days, apparently to get their breath back for a longer and more sustained blow; birds became restless as they realized the change of season; the blood of all stock ran hotter and ardor and amor rose to a new and higher tempo.

Brindle was leading his mob in to water one moonlight night, challenging as he traveled, when a rich note bugled in reply. It was deep in its belligerency, and it stood out from the replies of other bulls on other nights as the clarion call of a brolga dwarfs the stutterings of finches.

Perhaps Brindle recognized that call. He may have

known that it was Old Rowdy, may have realized that Old Rowdy, after the fashion of aged bulls, had hidden himself somewhere, solitary, motionless, waiting for the breath of summer to heat his blood again, to fill him with lust and the desire to fight, so that he could rejoin his mob. In any case, Brindle at once strode to the lead, advanced to meet that monster in the moonlight, and bellowed his hate.

The two met and eyed each other from a distance of about thirty feet. If Old Rowdy could have talked to himself, he might have said: "That boy's put on the best of five hundred pounds' weight since I saw him last. He's a man now. His horns have grown, too: they're black-tipped, needle-sharp, shining like smooth rapiers from being polished on the ground. He is educated in the ways of war and the manner of battle. He'd be pretty hard for an ordinary bull to beat. But I'm no ordinary bull. I own that mob. I want it. I belted the fellow before, and I can belt him again. Come on, Brindle. Don't waste time. I want my cows as soon as I've beaten you!"

Brindle himself knew that this was to be the fight of his life; that Old Rowdy would battle to the death for the mob he considered his own. But if Brindle remembered that Old Rowdy had belted him before, that shame was swallowed in the memory of the many recent victories over lesser bulls; and he went willingly to battle.

The bulls swelled themselves, their bodies side-on to each other while they went proppily on their tiptoes,

balanced for action, their mighty necks arched as they turned to face each other. Their eyes flashed fire, and they mumbled deep down in their throats as they circled.

They met with a clash of colliding horns, with a spatter of dust from shuffling feet. They probed and fenced for an opening, horn-tips raking hair from forehead; they arched their loins as their bodies heaved, while their scrambling hind hooves fought on the loose ground for a footing. They tested each other as they swung with locked horns; the mingling of their hot breaths raised them to greater heights of fury and hate.

The cows stood round in an admiring circle. They must have known that they were the prize for which those bulls fought. They appeared uninterested in the outcome; they would submit to the overlordship of whichever proved the winner; that the loser would give his life in their defense was nothing to them. As a spectacle put on for their enjoyment it was quite worth watching.

One red cow, long and rakish, with a horn that drooped over one eye and made her look like a slatternly street-walker with hat askew, almost trembled with excitement. She was a vulgarian: her actions and her appearance bespoke that. Could she have put her thoughts into words, these would have been:

"Good on you, Brindle! You might be a bit rough with us old girls, young fellow; but that's the way we likes to be handled. Uppercut him, Brindle! Now's your chance: swing with your right! That's the style:

prop him off with the left and cross him with the right! Put the boot in when you gets him down! Go on, Brindle: swing with the right!"

But now that old cow was embroiled in a fight of her own. In her excitement she had been prancing wildly, showing Brindle just how he should conduct the fight, and in her fervor she had uppercut another spectator! So the two cows fought—fought with horns locked, with a spurt of spume from their nostrils, with a scurry of scampering feet. Brindle's supporter was pushed backwards and disengaged in a flash; and, unconcerned and unruffled, the two took their places again in the circle of spectators.

The two bulls were sparring for time, horns locked, standing easy for the moment while balanced on the brink of instantaneous attack. The grass about them was chopped to chaff, the ground torn to dust. They were pumping great gallons of air into burning lungs; the muscles and sinews of their limbs trembled and quivered; their eyes were red; tongues lolled from panting mouths; even though they stood at ease, the intolerable strain was on them all the time.

Brindle lunged—drove forward in an action so sudden that no unit of time could measure it. Old Rowdy took that weight, held it, countered it. They shuffled again as they worked round in a circle from the pivotal point of their locked horns, and they fought desperately if not spectacularly. Brindle caught his hind hoof on an upthrust bit of rock so firmly embedded as to be

part of the earth itself. He was safe: his hoof would not slip, no matter what strain he put against it.

Old Rowdy was being forced back. He went slowly, an inch at a time, battling all the way. He went back and back till, on the point of crumbling, he dropped to his chest on the ground—went down to a defensive position roughly corresponding to the double-smother of a skilled boxer.

Brindle swung like lightning: he slipped Old Rowdy's guard and hooked one horn into his brisket just inside the shoulder. He pushed. The polished horn went in smoothly and easily, and only the anguished roar of Old Rowdy told that anything untoward had happened. Brindle lifted suddenly, with a toss of his head that cracked his neck muscles. Then came a sucking sound, so low it would pass unnoticed, and he bounced back as Old Rowdy rose to his feet. Brindle was indeed skilled in the art of war!

Old Rowdy stood for a second, the blood spurting in broad streams from his wound. He was ripped from the point of his brisket to the top of his shoulder-blade. That scimitar of a horn had gone in, torn as clean as a butcher's knife, run up between his shoulder-blade and his ribs. That leg hung helpless, attached to the body only by a hinge of skin at the top of the shoulder. But Old Rowdy was game: in spite of his crippled state he charged to the attack!

Brindle took him easily, played with him almost; then slipped his guard and got beneath him. He lifted,

hoisting that squirming body high in the air before letting it fall from his horns.

Old Rowdy was beaten—disemboweled, his entrails squirming like serpents as they lay about him. It was hideous, hateful; but it was war.

Brindle had no pity in his composition. He leapt upon that helpless body. He thrust and ripped with his horns; he knelt on the supine body and pommeled it with his knees; he slobbered over it as he roared his rage; he tore that body and strewed it about the ground. He was berserk with anger, blind with passion, mad with rage.

He stood over the corpse that had been a bull. He roared his challenge. He was bespattered with filth, daubed with blood, covered with dust. He stood there red-eyed, panting from his exertions, ready to fight anything that challenged him.

The noise of the fight had drawn all cattle within hearing. They had come running in strings, gathered about the warriors, moving about in panting excitement. Among these, several fights broke out—the inevitable consequence of the odor of blood in the air, the intoxication of the situation, and the desire to show prowess.

Gradually these alien cattle dispersed, feeding off in groups as the fever died down. Brindle's mob slipped in to water, had their drink, and returned just as the sky in the east was paling. Brindle had not moved from the scene of battle. He was there, statuesque, still raking dust, occasionally bellowing.

The brumby mob strung past on their way to the

desert. Now Brindle suddenly remembered that he was the owner of that mob, and also that he had not been in for a drink. But what was a trip to the water on an occasion such as this? It warranted something more important by way of celebration.

Brindle advanced to a red cow that had attracted his attention. She ran from him. He followed. The cow dodged in an effort to get past him. He stood in her path and blocked her. She evaded him and slipped away in another direction. Brindle followed, caught up with her when she slowed down, and turned her in the direction in which he wished her to go.

The hunt and the evasion went on till the cow, leaden with fear, dragged down by exhaustion, panting and weary, was unable to run further. She stood, palsied by panic, held by dread, while the bull came to her. He turned her, got behind her, drove her before him towards the timber at the edge of the desert.

16. *The Reprieve*

ALL THE CATTLE WERE STRONG AND IN GOOD HEART when summer came in full blast. The brumby mob, running on the outside of the worked country, where feed was plentiful and clean, were particularly good. The feed was dry—dry as the proverbial tinder—but it was nutritious.

The season continued dry, with hot winds from the gates of Hades, and as the outside waters dried the stock congregated in larger mobs at the bigger holes. Also, though the feed had been plentiful, much of it disappeared in those hot winds, leaving only the hardier tussocks behind.

The management was anxious; bores were opened on reserved country, and stock was shifted and more evenly distributed.

"We're right for some time yet," Leonard commented. "If we don't get dribbles of rain, spoiling grasses, then we can hang on till after the wet season. If we don't get a wet season, that means to the end of March, Tom, if you want it on the calendar."

The storms started about the end of the year: heavy clouds rolled up, thunder cracked, lightning blazed, useless scuds of from ten to twenty points of rain fell on scattered areas.

That disturbed the cattle. As soon as the sweet smell of wet earth came to them they would lift their heads, sniff the breeze, give sound to the "water call" known to all stockmen and stock, and wander storm-hunting.

One mob of a couple of hundred left the Turkey Bore one afternoon, lured by the smell of wet earth in the distance. By the time they had gone a few miles, half the mob had fallen out and returned to the bore. Other stragglers left the leaders to chase the will-o'-the-wisp alone. Those leaders comprised a mob of some seventy-five bullocks in strong forward condition, needing only a little topping-up to make them fats fit for the market. Continuing on, they crossed an area of several thousand acres on which a scud had fallen; here the good grass had turned to rotten stubble not worth its cost in brown paper as feed for stock. So the lure drew them still farther.

Next day, about sundown, the mob of wanderers returned to Corella Hole on the river. They were hollow-flanked, gaunt, their eyes staring, their condition gone. Wearily they dragged their feet as they walked. One bullock who, the day before, had been so strong that he might have matched his strength against a locomotive, now floundered into the water, his feet caught by no more than a few inches of mud, his head submerged. He splashed as he struggled, with foam rising about him, and great bubbles of air burst on the surface as he fought for breath. That steer had been the making of a seven-hundred-pound bullock, young and in his growing age, when he ran in to water. Ten minutes

later he was only a corpse, which had to be dragged from the hole lest the rotting body pollute the water, and from which red-ringed bubbles rose slowly and broke on the surface!

Towards the end of January, with no rain in sight, with further areas of grass blackened, a start was made to shift the cattle.

"We're sending all bullocks and stores inside," Leonard told his head stockman. "It's going to knock hell out of them to get them in there. With a bit of luck, we can rush 'em through. The Company's got a place in there. It's no good sending sale stock away from the markets. When the rains do come, they'll be on the spot in there.

"We'll ease about eight thousand off the place. That leaves us to carry about six thousand. We can do it by opening all the bores. Thank goodness, this is salt-bush country; it stands up to punishment. We'll send from five to six thousand breeders and young stuff up towards the Gulf country—they've had rain up there. It's sour country and it's going to play the devil with these stock; but it may save them. That's our program, Tom. We'll work out the details later."

The cattle were shifted—mustered in clouds of dust, worked in showers of sweat, belabored with oaths that blistered. Most of them trudged away in the mobs to which they were consigned, placidly obedient to the men's wills. But some looked back as they were driven away, bellowing what must have been a farewell to the country that was part of them.

"Th' damn' things knows," Tom told himself. "Th' man what says cattle don't know nothin' has never worked cattle."

The end of March saw the last of the possibility of a season. The time had gone by, and in the months during which rain should have fallen there had not been one fall anywhere to make a shoot of green grass, and thousands of acres that should have waved under nutritious grass were rotten stubble, ruined by useless scuds.

The birds realized that the season had missed. They left. No man saw them going; no one could definitely say they had gone. Odd mobs were noted making in an easterly direction; fewer made to the north. It was only when the men who stayed behind looked for the birds that should be there that they understood what a mighty migration had taken place secretly. On the coastal lands to the east, and to a lesser extent in the north, residents suddenly awakened to the fact that plain turkeys in numbers were among them, that budgerigars slashed green blankets in flight through the air, that top-knot pigeons whistled with cutting wings as they flew, and that strangers from the west had come in numbers. Those coastal dwellers—as is the way with mankind in general—cleaned their guns, oiled their rifles, and went out to deal death to the wanderers.

Leonard was rarely at the station. He traveled from mob to mob on the roads, advised, eased complications, and unraveled knots wound by office-bound authorities who worked stock on paper and by government regula-

tions. He had to remain mentally alert, but the drudgery of the job kept him physically weary.

The cattle left on the station were distributed among the various bores, and handled with care; only stragglers remained on the river frontages to drink from those waters.

Tom Mitchell's job was also endless, calling for tact in the handling of men as well as in the distribution of cattle. He was crude of manner, rough of speech; but he was respected for his ability and his genuine honesty of purpose. Tom knew what it was to nurse a tired horse over weary miles, to ride through the long night, to count on a certain circumstance as the basis of work, then to find that base entangled by a set of conditions over which there could be no human control, and to see it swept away. He knew what it was to start to build again, to juggle time with distance, to work short-handed. In short, Tom was a loyal head stockman.

Mrs. Leonard, as the boss's wife, had to bear her share of responsibility, to keep the domestic wheels turning smoothly. She did. She was the wife of a back-country manager, and she carried her burden cheerfully, without complaint, with the courage of her class. One day, noting smoke in the west, and an answering plume from the camp on the river, she asked Monkey: "What name belong-it Toko?"

"Tha' one Mookai, him been tie."

"That old beast dead?" she exclaimed spitefully. "I'm glad. I'm only sorry they aren't all dead! I don't want to hate them, God—I don't, really. I—I—"

And the overwrought woman dropped on the bed and sobbed great body-wrenching gulps of dry tears.

The brumby mob were fading slightly in condition—and with any station stock “condition” is a synonym for strength. They had a slight advantage over the cattle who ran on the open downs: they had a variety of feed. There were green vines and shrubs in the desert, which alone could not support life; but taken along with the dry grass, they acted as a laxative to avert the danger of impaction, which carries off so many weak stock.

There was a bore in operation—Belinda Bore—a little off the straight track and midway between the desert and the river. Joe Powers, its pumper, was a fairly good cattleman, observant, not overfond of work. The job suited him: there were only about twelve hundred mixed cattle watering at that bore, and the work of pumping with a steam-engine for that lot was only sufficient to keep him in health and give him an appetite. The job suited him.

Brindle soon realized there was water in his country nearer than the river. He did not reason—he had no need to reason to work out the advantages of watering at the bore.

One day, after the bore had been working for about a month, Joe told Tom: “That there Brindle’s watering at this bore.”

“Eh?” Tom asked, a dozen thoughts flashing through his mind.

“Yes. Him an’ me’s gettin’ to be good cobbers now.

At first he used to go like stinkin' blazes as soon as he saw me. He nearly always leaves th' troughs a bit after daylight. After we got used to each other, he used to shake his head when he seen me—shake his head an' snort. Then he knocks off snortin' an' on'y shakes his head. This mornin' he on'y looks at me an' don't even shake his head. I'll have that fellow eatin' out of me hand yet."

"You'll be fit to take a job with a circus when you do," Tom replied. "Don't you run away with no notion that Brindle's any Mary's little lamb."

"I was watchin' him this mornin'," Joe continued, loving to talk for the sake of talking, as all solitary workers do when they have company. "I was lookin' at him stretchin' himself an' rakin' up th' dust. He's a artist at it.

"First of all, Brindle gets down low in front, so's to lengthen his reach. Then he reaches out with one hoof as far as he can. He bows his head an' arches his neck. He gets a fistful of dirt in his hoof an' he starts to bring it back slow. He rakes it right un'er him, pickin' up more dirt as he goes along; he pushes that behind him as far as he can reach, an' then he gives a flick what tosses a shovel of dirt in th' air. He's a artist, is Brindle!"

Tom did not reply. He thought to himself: "I wish to Christ *I* had th' time to spare to watch bulls rakin' dust."

"What about that bloke, Tom?" Joe continued. "I

heard you wanted him shot. Send me out a rifle and I'll flop him for you any day you like."

"No!" Tom almost exploded. "We're keepin' that fellow for a while, Joe. He gets such good stock that they've decided to let him keep goin' for a year or two. Don't shoot him. Don't you get tryin' for to put no salt on his tail, neither. Just leave him alone, Joe, without disturbin' him."

Riding away from the bore, Tom held communion with himself: "I got sen-ti-ment, I have. This fight's between me an' Brindle. I don't want no outsiders buttin' into me private feuds. Me an' Brindle can settle this between ourselves. I got sen-ti-ment: I don't want to take no advantage of him in a dry season. Me an' Brindle's goin' for to settle our dispute after th' rains."

The drought continued. Taken all in all, the stock were holding out well. Odd weaklings fell by the way and were unable to rise again; their bleached skeletons later drew parallel white lines on the ground where they had fallen. The birds looked drab and bedraggled; there was no joy in their songs, nothing gladsome in their flights. The grasses grew dryer every day, and the weary fight for life continued with all its monotony and drudgery.

Winter came. Ice-laden winds shrieked from the southeast, plucking life from weak bodies as easily as they picked leaves from trees. After the first rush and roar and bluster they settled down to a steady stream, drying a parched land still further, drawing on the weakness of feeble stock, adding to the misery of ani-

imals who lacked the bodily sustenance that would supply warmth.

Suddenly, and with a snap that left the world breathless, the winds stopped towards the end of June. A hushed land seemed to walk on tiptoe lest it wake the monster, and all creatures muted their calls in the strange silence.

A blanket of clouds worked up from the north. They did not come as do the summer rains, with rocking roars of laughter when the thunder bellows, with white teeth grinning in sizzling lightning across the sky, with giggling gusts of wind that tickle the leaves of the trees to mirth. This winter rain was different.

It came sullenly, a gray blanket of doom. It came as a squeezed sponge, mirthlessly, miserably, falling with a monotony that draped the world as in a shroud. There was no music in this rain.

But it filled the creeks and gullies with a sullen solemnity that was appalling in its certainty; it ran the river, which sneaked silently as if ashamed of itself; it drenched a sodden ground and left water in the ghilgais. And all this was a very unusual thing in that dry country. There, a winter rain is one of the chances of the dice of the gods, coming only once in an average of twenty years.

Mobs of birds without the strength to preen their feathers were doomed: the rain got in under them and waterlogged them, and they died miserably. Cattle walked about with humped backs, hollow flanks, shivering, with bellies so empty that they provided no

warmth. Many gave up the unequal fight. Brindle lay at the edge of the desert, away from the mud on that sandy soil, his great frame shaking in tremors as the rain fell on him, formed runnels, and coursed down his ribs to the ground.

17. *The Last Round*

THE CLOUDS WEPT THEMSELVES THIN, WRUNG THE last few drops out, and, during the night, packed up and departed without leaving a wisp in the sky. After a three-day retirement the sun lighted a bejeweled world. Every tree was spangled with gems that tossed miniature rainbows when the breeze shook their leaves; every dry tussock of rotten grass on the ground was sprayed with diamonds; the spider webs spread between trees were outlined with seed pearls, while globules of rare beauty formed their centers. It was a new world, a beautiful world, a world washed clean and revitalized with snapping energy.

The Mitchell grass, that hardy old warrior, was the first to recover, to show streaks of green in stem and flag. A tender green covered the ground: soft, timorous, diaphanous, afraid to come with a rush, feeling its way as if not sure of itself. Those weak fronds seemed hurt by the rude wind bruising them, too fragile to fight their way in a hard world. But, weak and delicate though they seemed, they continued to grow. In about a week the whole land was inches deep in wild carrots, that marvelous winter herbage that can lie dormant for years and respond luxuriantly as soon as the winter rains fall; it would supply the most succulent of all

food for stock, piling on condition and fattening rapidly.

There were whisperings of torn air at night, a chattering of something in action, as the birds came back to their native land. Turkeys stalked sedately; the brolgas favored the claypan flats on which the mungeroos grow; quail were whizzing bullets of feathers in flight; waxbills, busy as ever, immediately began to pile untidy bundles of straw in the forks of trees, to serve as nests; the budgerigars, flying in green clouds, came back gladly to the land of their birth.

Steps were immediately taken to return the cattle to their station: there was feed to spare, water to waste. Tom Mitchell commenced a branding muster of those cattle which had been left behind and which had calves at foot. Brindle, with no flies or other stinging pests to worry him, with water at his convenience almost everywhere, returned to the warmth of the timber near the desert. The station had settled down to routine.

But those months of the drought had bred a new desire in Brindle. He had found the station cattle acceptable and companionable; a little added age and greater experience had taught him that men were harmless, almost friendly; it was better to walk openly and unafraid than to skulk like a hunted thing in faraway places. He, a master bull, could go where he wished and take what he wanted. Why should not he, lord of the herds, mix with the cattle and feed on the sweeter downs country?

The cattle fairly reveled in the carrots. A short time

back they had to walk for feed and search for grass; now they could rise from where they had been resting, stretch, grunt, lower the head, open the mouth and feed with certainty almost anywhere. It was good to be alive and on Yalbungra Station.

One day in August, just before the first of the returning cattle were due to arrive back at the station, Brindle was lying among the lignum in the billabongs. He was full with feed—almost bloated; he was fat, almost huge, with condition. He was lying in a channel, hidden by lignum, shielded from the eternal winds, chewing the cud, content to laziness. It was midway through the morning; the sun was deliciously warm; Brindle lay there without a care in the world. Perhaps he knew that he should be out in the desert; that did not worry him. He did not know whether his cows were near or far away; that did not worry him. He was too content to care.

He stopped chewing the cud while he gave attention to the clamor of the brolgas on the flat out from Prin-kella Hole. He understood that noise: they were troubled by the approach of a man on horseback. Brindle could picture those birds, could see them as plainly as if they were parading before him. He may have visualized it as he listened:

There were a hundred or more stately brolgas on the flat; they may have been there for company, or they may have been probing for mungeroos. The hen birds, slighter in build than the cocks, were gray and graceful

as they stalked daintily; the cocks were more militant, with head-dresses of flaming scarlet and bronze.

As soon as the horseman appeared, the birds stopped feeding, bugled the warning to each other, turned and bowed with elaborate care each to his partner. They went through intricate steps in their anxiety, bugling as they danced, and with careful courtesy they bowed in passing. The flat, as Brindle knew, was a tangled web of dancing birds, calling a pretended fear, hopping and running. One cock bird more nervous than others ran on his long stilts of legs, each step gaining in length, till, with a hop, he had left the ground. All the birds present had joined him, and now, weaving high in the air over where Brindle lay, they sent out harsh cries like the sound of a rusty key turning in a disused lock.

Brindle paused again and listened more intently. He knew that the men had passed the waterhole and were riding up the course of the river. He lifted his head and sniffed; but the wind was blowing at such an angle that it did not come from the direction of the sounds down the river. Brindle listened. He heard the whistle of a top-knot's wings, the call of a disturbed crow, the clatter of doves, the screeches of corellas. He knew that the man was coming up the river, could almost have pin-pointed his progress. He lay there, basking in the sun, too content to move, chewing the cud.

Brindle listened again. This time his body picked up the earth vibrations of horses walking—of several horses. His ears heard the rattle of hobble-chains. He understood that: often during the drought ridden horses

had passed by him, every one of them jingling the chains of the hobbles strapped round the neck for convenience in carrying. Brindle started on the cud again.

The sounds came nearer; Brindle could distinguish the voices of two men talking to each other. By this time he was accustomed to men's approach, and he did not trouble to stop the cud he was chewing. He was too comfortable to move, too indolent and lazy to worry, and though he may not have known it, his brindle stripes harmonized perfectly with the shadows laced over him.

Then Brindle was on his feet! He did not *rise*, in the sense in which the word is applied to stock. One second, that mountain of flesh was placidly lying at ease. The next—with no pause, no time lapse—he was on his feet, poised, ready to spring to shutter-click action!

"Strewth!" Tom gasped as he recognized the bull.

Brindle's actions may have been fast with a pace that defied any definition of time; but they were slow compared with Tom's racing thoughts:

"I'm comin' up th' river with Mungalo, bringing th' gear from th' last brandin' camp on pack-horses. I pokes into th' channels for no reason at all, an' I rides slap on top of Brindle! I got me dogs with me, an' Mungalo's just over there. If I lets him get a go on, he'll get his wind an' settle down by the time th' dogs is settled. If I bustles him quick, an' gets him excited, he'll blow up in no time. He's as full as a tick now. Them carrots is gassy stuff when a beast gets excited

—they'll choke him. Here's into you, Brindle! It's me an' you for it this time!"

Brindle stood for one momentary flash of time. He never turned and started—he was a galloping streak without any pause.

And Brindle's feet had not hit the ground in the first stride of that mad gallop before Tom's spurs had raked his mount's ribs, his whip uncurled, and his dogs sent forward with the spitting hiss that ordered them to attack.

"Get on to him an' bustle him," Tom told himself. "He can't go far with that full belly. He'll bail up while th' dogs is still fresh. Hey, Mungalo!"

Tom's whip bit and crashed on the bull's rump as he took the tangle of lignum in a blind rush. The dogs—Betty, Snip, and Nipper—followed like blue streaks in the wake of that floundering mammoth.

Brindle jumped from the edge of the lignum to the clear bed of a dry channel. Three lines in blue followed him. Brindle was breasting the lignum on the far bank when he stuttered in his stride. Actions were simultaneous: Betty snapped her steel teeth on his hind fetlock; Brindle lashed with blurred speed; Betty sank low coincident with the bite, and that whizzing death passed harmlessly over her.

Brindle bounded high and forward just as Snip's teeth clicked with a clash where his other hind hoof had been. The bull took the lignum with a cracking of dry twigs, a scatter of boughs. That tangle would stop a horse who attempted to get through it—Brindle

brushed it aside as easily as a man parts the soap-suds on top of water. He lashed again as either a dog or a broken stick pricked his hind leg, and bounded forward again, looking backwards, blind to all ahead.

He was held for a moment when a thicker band of lignum impeded his passage, and he plunged in his madness and bounded again. This time he fought for his footing while he was in the air, and strove to balance himself as he unwittingly charged from the edge of the bank into a four-foot drop to the bed of the next channel.

Brindle landed on his knees and nose in the bed of that channel. Floundering to regain his feet, he furrowed a track with his muzzle. Betty and Snip were at his heels, drawing blood at every chop; but so great was his panic that he never felt the pain. Nipper, son of the incomparable Stepper, was at his head, racing beside him, awaiting a chance to strike.

Tom raced up to the melee. Mungalo, white teeth blazing against black skin, was coming in the distance.

"You can't go far with that full belly," Tom shouted to the bull. "Take this to stir you along a bit!"

The *this* was a crack of the whip which thundered in Brindle's ears, which brought slow drops of blood welling from where it had struck. Though it added to Brindle's fears it also spurred him to draw on hidden energy: it seemed to lift him to his feet, to shoot him forward and drive him up the opposite bank, all in one action.

Brindle saw the level country before him. He

stretched to a lumbering gallop, head down, tail high, belly swaying. Betty and Snip were at his heels, not bothering to sink after biting—they knew that the pace of the bull would carry him forward far enough to make them safe when his kick came. And Nipper was racing at his head.

“He can’t do it,” Tom told himself. “That bull’s too heavy for any dog to handle. God! He’s goin’ for to try! He’s a champeen, whether he lives or dies!”

Nipper sprang, dodged those flying hooves, fixed his steel-trap jaws on Brindle’s nose.

Then a number of things happened simultaneously: Brindle, defying the excruciating agony of that bite on his tenderest spot, threw his head high; Betty sank her teeth in his hind leg; Tom gasped as he saw his dog flung high, cracked like a whip as the bull shook his head in a fruitless effort to release that hold; Brindle kicked savagely, putting all his power into it, as Betty bit.

Tom’s profane expletive of admiration was smothered by the earth-shaking shock of Brindle’s body hitting the ground. He had essayed too many things at once; he was excited; he did not know what he was doing; he was unbalanced; he fell.

“A blinkin’ miracle!” Tom gasped. “There’s no other dog in th’ whole blasted country could of done that! I’ll charge a tenner each for your pups, Nipper, when people hear about what you done.”

Tom was still babbling to himself when he found he had Brindle down. He did not know he had done any-



The dog flung high, cracked like a whip as the bull shook his head.

thing; his actions were subconscious; he thought only of Nipper's work. What he had done—though he did not know he did it—was to tap the pommel of his saddle, spring from his horse, run the bull's tail up between his hind legs, hold it in his hands while he knelt on his flank and leant back, lifting Brindle's top hind leg high in the air. This held him in a crippling position, unable to rise.

"Shake it up, Mungalo!" Tom called. "Get them hobbles off your horse's neck. Give 'em to me here. You take this tail. By th' living hell, you hold tight. If you lets him go, I'll kill you. Give me them hobbles and sit back here. There won't be no need for me to kill you if you lets him go—Brindle's goin' for to kill us both."

Tom worked quickly, with the dogs panting and eager about him. Betty and Snip danced in their excitement; Nipper stood at the bull's head, poised on his tiptoes, one ear pricked, the other thrust forward half-lopped, ready on an instant to dive in again and throw that bull once more. His back may have been jinked when the bull flicked him in the air; his body may have been bruised when he was entangled in the fall; but Nipper was on the spot, keen to do it again.

Brindle lay there, the breath knocked from him by the fall, the gasses in his stomach choking him, his mouth open and his tongue lolling as he panted for breath.

"That's goin' to do him for a bit till he cools off some," Tom said, surveying his work. "Let that tail

go, Mungalo. He can't get up with them two hind legs an' one front leg tied in them hobbles. He can't get too big a strain on, neither, as he's on'y pullin' against himself. We'll let him lie there an' cool off a bit while you brings them pack-horses over here so's we can get out what we want from th' pack-bags."

Brindle lay there, gasping gallons of air and but getting the benefit of mere pints of it. His distended stomach rose like a miniature hill, and his horns scraped the ground when he moved his head.

"Get me that dehornin' saw what's in th' bags," Tom told Mungalo when the boy came with the horses. "I got me knife in me pocket. That's about all what we wants. Wait a bit: Brindle looks to me about as secure as a grasshopper in a single strand of cobweb. Bring that rifle out of th' bags, too. If he kicks himself loose there ain't goin' for to be no beg-pardons—it's goin' to be me or him for it. An' I reckon it's a fair chance of bein' him if I've got this rifle. Bring that saw an' leave your horse tied up over there."

When Tom returned, Brindle was breathing more normally, though his tongue still had a slight tinge of blue.

"Get that saddle-strap, Mungalo. Put that through this hole what I cuts in his nose. Hang back on that: it'll keep his head a little bit steady. By th' livin' hell, if you lets go anythin', I'll near kill you."

Brindle submitted to it all, groaning slightly and struggling intermittently. But when the saw was put into his horn, the exquisite agony of ten thousand tooth-

aches drove him frantic. He struggled, plunged, bellowed in his rage, and flung Mungalo about, the hobble-chains creaking under the strain.

At last it was done: the horns lay on the ground, cut from two bleeding stumps, and the station earmark had been put in the proper ear. He was blue of tongue and lip, gasping heavily, as Tom slipped the saddle-strap from his nose.

"Get a move on you, Mungalo, an' move lively," he ordered, pulling Brindle's tail up between his hind legs again and sitting back with it in his hands. "Move quick! Get a wriggle on! We don't want this bull smotherin' on our hands after all we done. Take them hobbles off. Don't play with th' blasted things! Cut th' straps. We got plenty more hide, but there's on'y one Brindle. Cut th' dam' things!

"Now get on your horse and stand out in front there where he can see you. As soon as I lets him up, you call out so's to let him know you're out in front of him. Move your horse so's he can see you. Take th' dogs with you. I don't want for to attract Brindle's attention at all. You can do that: you'll be on a horse. Go on—move yourself!"

Tom released Brindle's tail, swung him so that he struggled, aided him to find his feet. He stood there, holding the tail between his hands, ready to steer the bull a little in the direction in which he wanted him to go, and a line familiar in his boyhood recurred to his memory. Referring to the animals entering the Ark, it ran: "Said the ant to the elephant, 'Who the hell are

you shoving?" "Tom grinned as he saw himself in the role of the "ant." But this "elephant" must be allowed to shove, unaware of the "ant."

When Brindle saw or heard the boy in front of him, he lurched forward in that direction, but Tom continued to stand so motionless that one would think him a graven statue; he must not move and thus draw Brindle's attention to him. He knew the saying: "A bull can forgive any man anything, except the man who takes off his horns!"

Brindle stumbled forward. He was stricken, exhausted, blind with pain, weak from loss of blood. The stump of each horn pulsed scarlet streams; he ran red rivers down inside both thighs. A film must have been over his eyes when he blundered into a small coolibah tree; he could not have seen where he was going when he tripped in a gully. He fell, and did not try to rise. He lay there, his head along the ground, barely breathing, moaning his anguish of body and spirit.

Tom rode past Brindle as he continued his way up the river. The blood was running sullenly, had ceased to spurt, and it was caking in great flakes where it ran over his body. His eyes were shut, and he did not prick an ear, let alone lift his head, as the man rode by him.

"That sort of thing would kill any ordinary bull," Tom told himself. "But Brindle ain't no ordinary bull. He's got a full belly; he was hot an' excited; but I've got faith in Brindle."

It was dark before Brindle's wounds had ceased to bleed, and he struggled to his feet. He was stiff, sore,

fevered. He shambled as he made his way to water. He drank. He dragged his hooves as he walked out. He found a place in the channels, sheltered from the winds by the lignum, and lay down.

It may be doubted that Brindle moved from that lair during the next few days. He may have walked to water. Odd cattle may have found him, been excited by the smell of blood on him, and may have jeered at him as they danced about. No one knew what he did or what happened to him.

About a fortnight later, Tom took delivery of the first of the cattle to return to the station. He counted them with the drover and let them go on the river frontage. He smiled to himself as those released cattle seemed to know they were home again, as they raked up dust, bellowed, bucked, scampered and waged sham battles. He watched them as they spread up the course of the river, and he could not help thinking to himself: "How ol' Brindle would enjoy this if he was here!"

Tom rode along the river on the way to his camp. He reached the leaders of the released cattle, who had already journeyed several miles from the spot at which they had been let go. They were nearly all steers, were bellowing and bucking on the bank of the outside channel. Tom rode over to see what had upset them.

It was Brindle! Gaunt and horrible, loose-skinned and with every bone showing, swollen, with patches of hair caked in dry blood, eyes sunken, flanks hollow, stiff at his joints and uncertain in his action, Brindle was painfully climbing out from the river.

As Tom watched, one of the playful steers stood in Brindle's path, held his head low, bellowed a challenge, raked some dust.

And Brindle the warrior, Brindle the gladiator, hero of a hundred fights and victor in a thousand skirmishes, turned slowly, stumbled weakly, and walked round that braggart steer!

Tom had sentiment—he admitted it himself. Now he gulped in sympathy with Brindle's humiliation, and cursed under his breath. And what came next roused his wrath.

For the steer, elated by his victory, would celebrate it and drive that victory home: he charged Brindle, pinned the squirming body with his horns, knocked the stumbling victim to his knees. He was so intent on punishing a helpless foe that he never heard the patter of Tom's horse—he knew nothing till he felt the sear of the whip, till Tom's voice roared at him:

"Me an' Brindle fights our own fights between ourselves. We've had th' last round. We're cobbbers now. You leave him alone!"

18. *Brindle Royalist*

OTHER MOBS OF CATTLE RETURNED TO THE STATION, to be let go, to be challenged by bellowings and dust-rakings from those already there. There were fights in plenty, a sorting out and dividing as cattle returned to their accustomed runs.

Brindle took no part in these gatherings. His wounds had healed, though the stubs of his horns were still tender; but he was weak physically, run down, in no condition to take part in rough, jostling demonstrations. He was recovering, building up, and occasionally he bellowed just to prove to himself that he had once been a bull. At odd times he saw horsemen riding along the river. They did not interfere with him. Brindle did not take any action against them. His spirit, as well as his body, had to recover fully from the indignities he had suffered.

Summer came at the end of October. The carrots just folded up and withered away as soon as the heat hit them. They had covered the ground with clothing inches deep; within a week the earth was bare again but for the carpet of seeds which they left when they died. The hundreds of thousands of birds attacked those seeds, gorged on them, grew fat and lazy on them; the ants in their millions took them to underground gran-

aries and stored them; the seeds remained, a mat that covered the ground. Gradually, a bit at a time and slowly, the dust covered them; by the action of the minute spikes that coated them they burrowed into the ground, to lie there in earth's incubator and spring to life again when needed in ten, twenty, thirty years' time.

Though the carrots were gone, the Mitchell remained green and plenty, full and succulent. The cattle did well, with rich blood again throbbing in their veins. Bulls fought more valorously, calves played more gayly as the sun went down and the cool of evening came. The calves had no worries at all: there were no flies, there was plenty of feed, their mothers' udders were bursting with rich milk. Life was good.

Brindle seemed to feel new desire as the heat of summer brought him added life. By now he was strong, healthy, perfectly healed. He lifted his head one night as the sun set; he sniffed the wind; he went purposefully in a straight line towards the desert.

He reached the area where the brumby mob ran. There he raked dust, bellowed, rubbed his cheek along the ground, and tried to flail some bushes—only to fail ignominiously owing to his lack of horns. However, he bellowed just as stoutly and raked dust in added volumes.

A youngish bull with red-and-roan markings came to meet him, to protect the mob of which he had taken the rights. They closed without unnecessary preamble.

The young fellow was lacking in experience; Brindle did not want to waste time.

This was easy: Brindle lowered his head, took the weight, used his skill artistically, pushed the other back as if he were playing with a calf.

The younger bull was game. He battled against the weight opposed to him, tried ineffectually to bring his horns into play. Brindle feinted, slipped the other's guard, deliberately left an apparent opening. He had done that trick many times—he knew it so well he could do it blindfolded. As the other bull lunged forward to take advantage of the baited lure left for him, Brindle would snap him with his horn, unbalance him, defeat him in quick order. It was all so easy for Brindle.

But he forgot that he had no horns! When he swung with a quick jerk to engage the other, his head went through aimlessly, with no jerk to tell of the horns engaging, and Brindle stumbled forward. This opened him still further to attack.

That young bull was no fool: he lunged home, his whole weight and impetus behind the thrust. He doubled Brindle round in an arc, draped him on his horns, and, but for the great weight of his opponent, would have thrown him over his shoulder.

So Brindle left the desert and the cows that had been his. He went as Old Rowdy had gone when hunting him in the past: with his loins arched, his head high, bellowing his anger and mortification. Sobbing his rage, he went blindly, falling over bushes and tripping on rocks. But he could salve his pride in one way,

and he took it deliberately: he stood over the bones that had once been Old Rowdy; here he raked dust; bel-lowed, went down on his chest and rubbed his neck along the ground, put his hornless head against a sapling and pushed till the trunk bent, creaked, and splintered. He still had instincts, even if he was no longer a bull.

Brindle returned to the mob with which he was running on the river frontage. He evidently realized that two great driving forces control the lives of all animals in a natural state: sex and food. He had no desire left to drive him, no impulse to urge him—Tom's knife had deprived him of these. His one driving force now, to which he could devote his whole time, was food. There was plenty of that and to spare. He piled on condition, and, with each pound he added, he grew hungrier and lazier.

The wet season came before the summer had time to dry the green from the grasses. The earth sprang to life again, and the air hissed and hummed to the winged pests that lived in it. It was a time of full and plenty for all.

Fairly late in March, just before the start of the first branding muster, Leonard and Tom were riding among the cattle that ran up Quail Creek.

"We won't have as big a draft of fat bullocks to send away this year, Tom," said Leonard. "But they'll be good. By the living Jingo, they'll be good! They won't be lifted from here till about August: they'll

have just on twelve months of the best green feed in the world to fill 'em out. They'll be good—prime."

They rode over to pay closer attention to a mob of a hundred or more mixed cattle that were gathered together under the shade of the coolibahs. As they drew nearer, a mountain of flesh rose from among those cattle and surveyed the approaching horsemen. It was Brindle! He walked out from the mob and stood clear of them. He was huge. He did not waddle when he walked—he was too well balanced for that; but he did sway from his own weight.

"Wait a bit, Tom," Leonard warned his head stockman as Tom gathered his reins. "Just let Brindle make his own decision. It'll be better for him."

Brindle held his head high as he watched the men approach. He snorted as they came nearer, stamped impatiently, then trotted away from the mob. He went for a couple of hundred yards, uncertainly. Then he stopped suddenly: he propped dead, wheeled, and raced back to the safety of the mob as if the fiends of hell were spurring him!

"I thought so," Leonard laughed softly. "He's suffering from agoraphobia—I think that's what they call it."

"He seems all right to me, Mr. Leonard," Tom protested. "His hooves might be a little soft on account of so much rain. But he don't look to have nothin' wrong with him to *me*."

"But, Tom, agoraphobia just means 'fear of being alone,' and that's what Brindle's got. He's had hell

handed out to him every time he's broken from a mob and run away on his own, and he remembers that. It's the best thing could happen to him. So long as other cattle don't follow him, he'll never go on his own again. He likes the safety of the mob. Look at him now, pushing his way to the center. Brindle's cured, Tom."

Brindle was mustered and put on camp several times during the work that followed in the next few months. Each camp added to his education; each pound of condition he put on added to his placidity.

"I'll give him Aggie an' Phoebe if ever he tries to break," Tom told himself. But Brindle never did try.

At last the time came, late in July, when the bullock muster started. The fats were taken from each kob, tailed, driven round as the muster progressed, put on camp, and watched at night.

The first night Brindle was put on camp, he was uneasy and nervous. He tried several places in that camp, and, as the sun set, he selected the place his wild instincts told him to take: on the outside of the mob. The first time after dark when the man on watch rode round past him, Brindle ceased to chew the cud, lifted his head, turned it and followed the man on watch till he swung round a wing of the sleeping bullocks. The next couple of times he followed the same procedure. The next three times he ceased the cud and followed the man with his eyes without turning his head. The next four times he continued to chew, never lifted his head, rolled his eyes, and kept track of the man. After that he paid no attention to him. He stirred only once

during the night: he rose to his feet with a sigh, a grunt, and a heave; he turned round, lay down again, and a great belch came from him as his belly hit the ground.

The muster was complete. Tom had more than eight hundred bullocks in hand, exactly eight hundred of them well grown, fat, and fit for the works; while the other nine were undersized, young, and low in condition.

"It's th' boss's idea," Tom told a questioning stockman. "He always slings in scrag-ends. He reckons th' buyer's goin' for to feel cheated of his job if he ain't got a few to sling out. If them rubbish ain't there, he'll toss out better bullocks. With them to reject, he feels he's done his job an' saves better stuff bein' passed out. A man's got to understand men as well as cattle when he's sellin' bullocks."

The cattle were put on their last camp to await the inspection of the buyer. The eight hundred good bullocks were in superb condition, fit to put on any market in the world. And among them Brindle stood out from the others like a leviathan among pygmies.

Leonard brought Wacker the buyer to the camp. The two of them, with Tom accompanying them, rode over to inspect the bullocks. Naturally, they talked shop—other cattle.

"How's that Arcadian Royalist shaping on Cootcah?" Leonard asked. "What sort of stuff are his bulls getting?"

"I saw the first of them this year," Wacker replied. "The bulls by Royalist sired the first batch of bullocks

they sold this year. They're good stuff. That Royalist blood was diluted a couple of times before it got to that draft of bullocks, but it's real good stuff. He puts his mark on 'em."

"You think he gets good bulls?"

"I'm sure of it. They won't have to brand their cattle soon."

"Eh?"

"No. They won't need a brand. All those Royalist bulls stamp their progeny so distinctly that a brand's only waste of time."

"What's the stamp, Wacker?"

"All stock by those Royalist bulls have a crown on the forehead, clean-cut, better than any brand. It's a family mark with them."

Leonard did some rapid mental arithmetic as they rode into the camp of bullocks. The creases on Tom's forehead told that he was similarly engaged.

"That's it!" Leonard grunted. "Tom saw him just nine months after. That's it, right enough!"

Tom nodded.

Wacker's eyes glistened and his pulse quickened a beat when he came close to Brindle. He rode behind him, pretending to gauge his weight. This was just a matter of form with him. It was also part of the technique of his caste to depreciate perfection.

"He'll be a good bullock next year," he said, indicating Brindle.

"He will," Leonard agreed quickly. "Take him out, Tom. We'll keep him till next year."

"I'll take him now," Wacker added hastily, watching Tom cut out that lumbering mass of flesh. "He's good enough for me now."

"He'll be better next year," Leonard replied.

"But I'll take him now," Wacker argued.

"You might get him next year."

"There might be a drought next year."

"Brindle's hardy. He can take it."

Wacker was annoyed. By his tactlessness he had lost a bullock over which he could gloat and which would bring him kudos from other buyers. Feeling spiteful, he pointed out to Tom one of the eight hundred that had been carefully selected for him.

"Do you want that fellow out?" Leonard asked.

"Yes. He doesn't suit me."

"If that bullock isn't brought back into the camp," Leonard retorted, "I'll let the lot go and send for another buyer. If another like him is sent out, it won't be any use for you to go further."

The work was completed without further incident. The fats went on down the river; the rejects, Brindle among them, were driven up the river and let go at a small waterhole where Leonard and Tom had unsaddled for lunch.

"Why'd you take out Brindle, Mr. Leonard?" Tom asked.

"Because I'm like you, Tom: I've got sentiment. That bull's by Wuringle Arcadian Royalist the Sixteenth. As soon as Wacker told me about the crowns I reckoned dates. There's not the least doubt about it

—no ordinary bull could have got a calf like Brindle from that one-eyed scrub cow.”

“I thought that, too,” Tom supplemented. “I’m glad you kept him. Me an’ Brindle’s cobbors now. I like that ol’ fellow.”

“I feel sorry for him,” Leonard added. “Under happier conditions, and with another mother, he might have headed a dynasty of his own, had his name emblazoned on plaques and won fame. As he is now, he’s just an unsexed and dehorned stag on a back-country station.”

“He’s a good advertisement for the place.”

“Yes—but I feel sorry for him. You remember that old bookkeeper on the station down the river: in his hilarious moments he used to boast he was by King Edward out of a German countess; he had all the desires and ambitions that usually mark a person of royal blood, with nothing but a bookkeeper’s job and wages to support them. Old Brindle’s in the same boat. I feel sorry for them.”

The men ceased talking as the sound of galloping cattle came to their ears. They looked out on the flat where the rejects had been released.

Brindle was in the lead, his great body swaying as he thundered the ground with his hooves, racing madly in a game of follow-the-leader while the others chased him. He bounded high, caught himself in the air, turned and landed four feet wide-braced, head low, tail high, facing in the direction from which he had come. He gave a playful bellow as a steer raced to-

wards him, started as though pricked by something, spun on his feet, and galloped off on another game.

"He's just a big calf," Tom murmured.

"And," Leonard added, "so long as either of us is on Yalbungra, Tom, there'll always be a home for that product of a *mésalliance* one dark night between a super-stud bull and a one-eyed cow: Brindle Royalist!"

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